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OR,
The Scout Detective's Double Role.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "OLD TOM RATTLER," "LITTLE
BUCKSKIN," "WHIP KING JO," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERRUPTED MEETING.

In a little park-like valley in the foot-hills of Southern Colorado, surrounded by tall and picturesque pine-clad bluffs, was located the cattle-ranch of Colonel Allen Rodman. A little brawling stream came rushing down from the mountains, dashed through the valley and out into the plain on its way to a tributary of the Arkansas River.

The ranch was reached from the plain by a road following the stream at the base of the im-

THE BUSH BENT AND SWAYED UNDER THE RECKLESS YOUTH'S WEIGHT AND
THREATENED TO DROP ITS BURDEN TO THE EARTH.

pinging bluffs, and along this road, early one May morning, a young girl came riding toward the open plain. It was Millie Rodman, the daughter of the colonel, and the idol of Rodman's Ranch.

Scarcely eighteen, with sparkling blue eyes, a pretty face flushed with the hues of health and youthful vigor, and a form of faultless mold, she presented a picture of charming young womanhood as she galloped along on her spirited pony, her face radiant in the bright beams of the morning sun, and a smile of happiness wreathing her red lips.

Miss Melicent was taking her accustomed morning ride, and, as she approached the plain, her face gradually assumed a look of eagerness and anxiety. This, however, gave way to a smile of joy when, on debouching from the narrow valley, she discovered a horseman riding toward her. She seemed to have known who it was, and he appeared to have recognized her, for he doffed his sombrero and waved it in the air. Millie answered by a wave of her hand, and then drew rein at the foot of a wooded bluff to await his approach.

In a few minutes he came up, and a pleasant greeting indeed did he receive from the maiden, whose very soul seemed thrilling with her joy in his presence.

The horseman was a young man of eighteen or twenty years of age, with a slender but athletic form, a bright, intelligent face, every feature of which—the dark-brown eyes, the broad, deep forehead, the straight nose, fine mouth and firm chin—indicated force of character and a fearless nature.

And Donald Barr was indeed a remarkable boy—an original character in many respects, trusted and mistrusted, feared and favored, praised and denounced perhaps more than any one person throughout the range and hill country of the West.

To Millie Rodman he was always Donald Barr, but to the ranchmen, the miners and people in general of that part, he was known as "Dagger Don," the ranger and scout. He had received this unfortunate sobriquet from his marvelous skill in throwing a dagger at a mark, oftentimes having given exhibitions of his skill with the blade in competition with fancy revolver-shots. But, to Millie the name was distasteful, for she loved the handsome young Freelance of hill and plain. The dislike grew stronger when, one day, she overheard the suspicious intimation, uttered by one of her father's cowboys, that Dagger Don, the scout, and Red Dagger, the outlaw, were one and the same person.

A band of outlaws was infesting the mountains, under the leadership of a man called Red Dagger, and since that scoundrel's movements were so quiet and swift—striking here to-day, and to-morrow at another point fifty or a hundred miles away—some believed Dagger Don was the only person in that country capable of such celerity and secrecy of movement, and hence was his name associated with that of the outlaw.

True, many fair-minded persons looked upon the boy as a free spirit, roving about for the pure love of adventure. If he was in the employ of any one, that person, and he alone, knew it, although many ranchmen and others were at various times placed under obligations to him for volunteer favors. One day a cowboy might meet him on the plain at one point; a stage-driver would report him, a few hours later at another, miles away, watching like a centaur from some prominence overlooking the trail; while, still later, on the same day, he would be heard from far over in the mountains!

As a rifle-shot he was most skillful, and as a horseman no Comanche warrior could excel him in reckless and daring feats.

Millie Rodman had first met him a year before, while taking one of her daily rides. He accompanied her home, and took dinner at Rodman's Ranch. He called frequently after that, when passing up and down the country. The colonel saw that a warm attachment had sprung up between the young people, and decided to "nip the thing in the bud," by sternly forbidding the young man calling there again.

However, the lovers managed to meet occasionally, by appointment, away from the ranch, and the meeting, on the May morning in question, was by previous arrangement.

The reflections upon Donald's character that Millie had overheard were made since their last meeting, and so she decided to acquaint him with the reports at the first opportunity. So, after they had discussed such topics as lovers are likely to be interested in, the maiden said:

"Donald, I have been more than anxious to see you for a week; I have something to tell you, though it pains me to have to do so. But I thought you ought to know that you are under suspicion, at Rodman's Ranch and elsewhere, of being Red Dagger, the outlaw."

"Why, Millie!" Don exclaimed with arched eyebrows, "that's nothing new to me! But, I presume it has been rung in at Rodman's Ranch to frighten you—turn you against me. Perhaps your father has heard of our meetings, and wants to impress you with the danger of being carried off by a bloody outlaw?"

"I do not know what the object, if any, is, Don," the girl replied.

"Do you believe the story, Millie?" he asked.

"No!" emphatically; "but I do wish you could convince them of your innocence, for my sake."

"Millie," added the boy earnestly, "I would gladly do anything honorable for your sake; but anything I might say or do would have no weight with your father. Moreover, if I should go to talking, it would put an end to my business. I know many wonder why I go riding up and down the range like a Bedouin, and you may, also, for I have never told you. But I shall do so now, for I want your implicit confidence. The fact is, Millie, I am a sort of a special scout and detective in the service of a number of horse-ranchmen of this country, and my line of duty lies over two hundred miles north and south, and extends far westward into the mountains. And, sometimes, I assist other detectives in running down criminals, or, more particularly, in locating them, for, in my long rambles, I meet many men of all classes. Now, you see if everybody knew my business, it'd be no business at all, and I couldn't ride the range a week. Besides my duty in looking after strayed and stolen horses, I am frequently called upon to carry valuable papers and money for my employers, and, even at this very moment, I have, in my breast pocket, a package of five thousand dollars, in bank notes, that the Reel Brothers intrusted to me to carry to Captain Clark, of Clark's Ranch, in payment for a lot of horses. Suppose it should become known that I was doing such work, how long would I live?"

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Millie in surprise, "you shouldn't run such risks, Donald! indeed, you shouldn't!"

"I am sure it's honorable, and I am well paid for it, besides."

"Oh! how I wish I dared tell my father what you are," the girl exclaimed, her mind greatly relieved by Donald's explanation.

"It would make no difference to him, Millie, if, as you say, he is determined upon your wedding Horace Davenport. Mr. Davenport is a wealthy young banker at Trinidad, and since I met you last I have heard him spoken of as a very upright and honorable man. But, like myself, he used to be a ranch employee. By industry, economy and honesty he soon became a ranch-owner, and, finally, quit the business and went to banking, worth a quarter of a million. I cannot think he has any hold on your father, in a financial way; and, even if he had, no honorable man would want to release that obligation by exacting of a father his daughter's hand without her free consent."

"There has been considerable correspondence of late between father and Mr. Davenport, I know," Millie said; "but, what it is about I do not know. I think father is financially embarrassed. But—Oh, yes! I had nearly forgotten to tell you that, in a day or two, father and I, and Old Aunt Martha, our colored woman, start for a three-months' sojourn in the mountains."

"Well, I am surprised! What does that mean?" exclaimed Donald.

"You know father's health has been failing for some time, and the doctor advised him to go up into a higher mountain atmosphere. Acting upon this advice he sent men up to the little mining-camp of Rainbow to put up a cabin and stable. They returned yesterday and reported the buildings completed, and the miners waiting to give us a royal welcome. It is nearly a hundred miles from here, and, as we may stay until September, I sincerely hope that I may have a chance to see you there."

"I may drift around there during the summer—no telling," he replied; "but, whether I do or not, I shall expect to hear from you occasionally. My earnest wish is that your father will be restored to perfect health, and that with his restoration will come good-will toward me."

"Oh, I do hope, Don, that he may find out from some reliable source your true character. It hurts me to hear the name of Dagger Don associated with that of Red Dagger, the outlaw."

"Confound that word, 'dagger,' anyhow," exclaimed the young scout dryly; "I wish the fellow that first applied it to me was in Patagonia or some other climate than this."

"They say everything happens for the best," said Millie, philosophically, "and it may be that—"

Millie did not finish the sentence, for at this juncture there was a slight rustle in the bushes near where they stood, their horses pricked up their ears and sniffed the air uneasily. Turning their eyes in the direction whence the sound came, Donald Barr and his little sweetheart saw a masked man with a cocked revolver step into view not twenty feet away, and, with the murderous weapon leveled full upon the young scout, he called out, in a gruff tone:

"Young man, I'll trouble you for that five thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER II.

A MIDNIGHT MISSION.

MILLIE RODMAN was almost paralyzed with terror at sight of the masked robber and the sound of his muffled voice. As he raised his revolver a cry burst from her lips and she wheeled her pony and dashed away, holding her hand over her ear that she might not hear the expected murderous shot of the outlaw.

At the top of her pony's speed she made straight for the ranch, never once glancing back through fear of what she might behold.

In a few minutes the ranch was reached, and her wild cries for help brought her father to her side.

Quickly and unhesitatingly she told him of Donald's danger, and implored him to send men to his aid.

Allen Rodman was fifty years of age, but looked much older, his hair and beard being almost white. He was a large, and had once been a powerful man, but the ravages of some insidious disease were fast telling upon him. His stern, set features were pale and hollow, but his keen gray eyes were full of fire and luster, and when his daughter had told him of her meeting with Dagger Don, and the peril she had left him in, they fairly flashed in momentary rage.

"I hope they'll kill each other!" was the heartless response the distressed girl received; but the old man seemed to suddenly regret his words, and added: "but I'll see if I can find a man to send down there."

In a few minutes the cowboys were galloping down the valley toward the plain, while Millie, having dismounted, was walking to and fro, almost crazed with fear and suspense.

Her father finally came to her and bade her go into the house. With heavy heart she obeyed, while Rodman walked off down the valley as if impatient himself to hear how the boy and the robber had come out in their encounter.

In the old colored servant, Martha, and her husband, Uncle Rufus, Millie alone found words of comfort and sympathy.

Watching from the window she finally saw the cowboys returning at a gallop. About fifty rods from the ranch they met her father, with whom they stopped and conversed for several minutes—minutes that seemed hours to Millie.

At length they started on, and, as they neared the house, the maiden stepped to the door, and was about to make inquiry when one of the cowboys said, with a sadness in his tone:

"It's all up, Millie, with Dagger Don. His fate is sealed!"

A cry of agony burst from the girl's lips, and, staggering back, she sunk into a chair, and gave way to a paroxysm of grief. Finally, she retired to her room and shut herself up and was not seen again for hours. But, from her chamber window, she saw a number of the ranchmen, armed and equipped for a long ride, mount their horses and depart. Where they were going she knew not, but she took some little comfort from the thought that her father might have sent them in pursuit of Donald Barr's murderer.

When she left her room the day was well advanced. Shunning all others she sought Uncle Rufus whom she found hoeing in a patch of potatoes back of the residence.

"Uncle Rufus," she said, "do you know whether the men have buried the man killed on the edge of the plain this morning, or not?"

"Lor, Miss Millie!" exclaimed the old dorky, "long ago."

"Did you hear the men say anything 'bout the matter—of the killing?" she again inquired.

"Yes, Miss Millie, I just did hear 'em talkin' as if de young Dagger Don wasn't dead, and I axed ole Massa Rodman 'bout it, and he done tole me to g'long off or he'd break my head if

I didn't keep my mouf shet. Som'fing queer 'bout dat murder, jist suah," and Old Rufus shook his woolly head dubiously.

"Uncle," persisted Millie, "will you do me a favor?"

"Hasn't I alers been youah frien', Miss Mill? Hasn't I alers done what you axed? In cou'se I hab, and I will ag'in."

"I want you to go with me to the grave of that dead man and dig up the body."

"Oh, Lor'! I se afeard!"

"Of what?"

"Ob ghostesses."

"Fie! there are no such things as ghosts."

"Oh, golly! yes, Miss Mill! I se see'd 'em wid bofe my eyes."

But, determined upon seeing the face of the man buried that day, Millie argued with the ignorant old servant until he finally agreed to accompany her.

"Then meet me to-night at the southwest corner of the cattle-corral," she said; "bring a spade and lantern, but do not light the lantern. Be there, Rufus, at midnight and I'll be sure to meet you."

"I'll be dere, Miss Mill," said the old darky, mopping from his face drops of perspiration that thoughts of their midnight mission had started.

And, true to his promise, he met the brave girl promptly, at midnight, at the corner of the corral, with spade and lantern, and together the two stole rapidly away down the valley to the plain.

On the very spot where Millie had met Donald, in the morning, they found a new-made grave.

Lighting the lantern Old Rufus went to work, Millie holding the light, and in a few minutes he reached the body, for the grave was shallow. It had been wrapped in a blanket, and, after all the dirt had been removed, Old Rufus took hold of the blanket and lifted the stiffened form from the grave and laid it upon the surface.

"Now den, Miss Millie," said the old darky, his teeth chattering, "be brave, and de wu'st'll soon be over with. Hol' de light a little lower, Miss Mill!"

Millie lowered the light and Old Rufus parted the blanket that covered the face.

A low, subdued cry of mingled surprise and joy escaped her lips. *The face of the dead man was not that of Donald Barr, but of Dave Bascom, the foreman, of Rodman's Ranch!*

CHAPTER III.

A THRILLING RACE.

WE will now see what the outcome of Dagger Don's encounter with the masked robber really was.

The sudden departure of the terrified Millie, the boy had hoped, would involuntarily divert the villain's attention from him that he might be enabled to take advantage of it, but, in this he was mistaken. Without moving a muscle the rascal continued his gaze straight at the young scout and quickly supplemented his first demand by this order:

"Onbuckle that belt, young man, and drop them guns; and be speedy 'bout it, too, for that stamped young heifer may make me trouble. Oh! I heard what you said 'bout the Reel Brothers' five thousand dollars you war carryin', and I'm in need o' jist that amount, and I want it now pretty darned immediately!"

Dagger Don, while taken wholly by surprise, maintained the presence of mind of a veteran, but fully realized that he was in a trap. So he quietly unbuckled his belt to which were suspended his revolvers, and dropped it to the ground.

"Sensible boy," exclaimed the robber; "and now, if you have any other guns 'bout your clothes you'll disgorge them also. Oh, I've got you foul, Dagger Don."

"I have no other pistols, sir," answered the scout.

"Then let's have the wealth," demanded the villain, lowering his revolver and advancing with outstretched hand to receive it.

Donald thrust his right hand into the bosom of his buckskin overshirt, ostensibly to get the package, but, quick as a flash of lightning, he withdrew it, grasping a long-bladed knife, which he flung with all his marvelous skill before the outlaw could comprehend the movement.

With a wild gasp and a stifled cry, the masked villain reeled, dropped his revolver, and clutched wildly at his breast, into which, almost to the guards, Dagger Don had driven the terrible blade with deadly precision at the distance of fifteen feet!

The next moment the young scout was off his horse, and, picking up his belt, was in the act of drawing a revolver to complete his deadly work.

But of this he saw there was no need, for the robber having in his agony withdrawn the dagger from his breast, sunk upon the ground, to all appearances dead.

The young scout detective waited for nothing more, but replacing his belt, he leaped into his saddle and dashed across the creek and away northward, along the base of the foot-hills.

He had gone less than forty rods, when, glancing back, he saw two horsemen coming in hot pursuit. That they were confederates of the man who had attempted to rob him he had no doubt, so, giving his horse the rein, he swept along at a livelier gait.

The thought of seeking safety at Rodman's Ranch never once entered his mind. In fact, he would have run a hundred risks of his life rather than have gone upon that forbidden ground.

To his surprise, however, his two pursuers soon gave up the chase and rode back, and the last sight the young scout had of them they were dismounted at the side of their dead friend.

Holding his northward course a few miles the scout finally turned to the left and entered the hills. His path lay along a narrow valley, which became deeper as he advanced, until it finally assumed the magnitude of a canyon, with high and rugged bluffs on either side. It was his route to Clark's Ranch, which lay some fifty miles to the northwest, in a lovely park in the great mountains.

It was a lonely road, dreary and desolate, yet more than once had the intrepid young Freelance ridden it. To him every feature was familiar along the way, and thus upon known grounds, he felt no fears about eluding the outlaws should they be disposed to follow him.

Half a mile slipped behind him, and he finally drew rein at a mountain spring to rest and water his horse. After an hour's tarry he was in the act of remounting to resume his journey when he detected the sound of hoofs coming up the canyon. With his foot in the stirrup he hesitated a few moments, which sufficed to bring into view half a dozen horsemen some forty rods away! Despite the distance he could see they were all masked, and, as this was sufficient evidence of their character, he sprang into his saddle and was off like the wind.

"Halt! halt!" rung upon his ears from the pursuers, but unheeding the command, he received another of a more emphatic nature. It was the report of revolvers and the whistle of bullets around him—some of the latter uncomfortably close.

Donald was soon convinced that he was in great danger—that it was a race for life; but, barring accidents, he had hopes of the superior speed and endurance of his horse carrying him safely through.

But, alas! for human hopes! The pursuers kept up their firing until, at last, a bullet struck his horse in the right hind leg, and, with a snort of pain, immediately it went lame. Yet with a new burst of speed it dashed on, but this could not last long. When Don saw its strength and speed gradually failing, he began to consider some other means of escape. He glanced up at the towering bluffs on either side and then back at his pursuers. To his surprise he saw that one of the latter had left his friends quite a distance behind, and was gaining rapidly upon him. He had evidently emptied his revolver, for he had ceased firing.

The intrepid scout saw that his time for action was short if he would elude an encounter with the outlaws. His horse was momentarily growing worse, and its speed was now little better than the youth could have made on foot. The presence of a rift on his right—the entrance to a deep defile—had no sooner caught his eye than a thought flashed through his brain, and, whirling his horse into the pass, he urged it forward to a last effort.

For the time being he was out of sight of the outlaws. Drawing rein, he leaped from his saddle and in a tone of sadness spoke to his horse, which limped on ahead. Then, whipping out his revolver he awaited the approach of his pursuers. Nor had he long to wait. The villain riding in advance suddenly swept into view but a few paces away, Don fired, and the masked man threw up his arm to return the shot, but, before he could do so a second shot from Barr's revolver tumbled him from his saddle, while his horse, never slackening its speed—in fact, frightened to renewed exertions by the fall of its rider—swept on up the defile.

As it passed, Dagger Don, with an agile leap, seized its long mane with both hands, but so quickly was he jerked from his feet that his heels flew into the air, and for several moments he seemed to lie along the terrified horse's side as if held there by cohesion; then his feet

once more touched the ground and again they flew into the air—this time so high that by a dexterous whirl of the body he landed upon the animal's back! It was a desperate, a daring, an almost foolhardy act, but one characteristic of the adventuresome young Freelance.

Once more seated in the saddle on a fleet horse, he could defy his pursuers, for a time, at least.

The other outlaws had swept around the point just in time to see his last performance; then, uttering yells of rage, they spurred their foaming horses on, like demons possessed.

CHAPTER IV.

A FEARFUL LEAP.

DON knew the race was now for life—that, if ever caught, the outlaws would show him no mercy. So, speaking kindly and encouragingly to his new steed, he held the animal down to a gait that did not permit the pursuers to gain upon him.

What obstacles to his flight the canyon might present before he was entirely out of it he knew not, for he had never traversed it before. But, before he had gone many miles, he had reason to feel uneasy, for the way was gradually becoming rougher and narrower, and he knew not what minute it might be blocked altogether. To get out of the pass on horseback was entirely out of the question, for the sides were almost perpendicular. Even to have attempted to scale them on foot would have been difficult; therefore he determined to stick to the saddle until forced to give it up.

The pursuers by this time had settled down to a steady pace, occasionally giving utterance to a shout that evidenced an anticipated victory. In fact, they were acquainted with the pass, and knew that the chase must soon come to an end—that the fugitive would be stopped by impassable barriers.

"Ho! the murderous young devil!" shouted one of the masked villains; "he has led us a fine chase, men, but we'll soon have him holed. It's less 'n a mile to where the canyon ends. Oh! it's a glorious trap the smart Alec's ridin' into!"

"Ah! look!" suddenly cried a second outlaw; "what's he up to now? Showin' off his skill! By heavens! what a horseman he is! He's the devil's own brat on horseback!"

This complimentary outburst was called forth by sight of Dagger Don standing erect in his saddle with his horse at full speed! What he meant by it they could not imagine, but they were not long left in ignorance.

Some distance ahead of the fugitive, a bush, growing from the face of the perpendicular cliff, hung out into the defile some fifteen feet from the ground. As the young scout passed under this, he was seen to bound suddenly upward into the air, as if from a spring-board, and grasp the bush, and there hang dangling in the air while his horse, again riderless, ran on a few rods to where the canyon came to an abrupt end.

The bush bent and swayed under the reckless youth's weight, and threatened to drop its burden to the earth; but, quick as a cat, the boy transferred himself along the limb to the face of the cliff, out of a crevice of which the strong shrub grew, and then swung himself up and planted his feet firmly upon the slight escarpment.

For nearly a hundred feet above him the cliff rose straight into the air. From crevices in its rocky facade hundreds of small pines had grown out and turned upward toward the light. This Dagger Don had observed before he had made his leap. To scale that cliff now seemed his only chance of escape, for he saw that the defile before him suddenly closed, as he surmised would be the case.

Successful in gaining a foothold on the first little ledge, he began to climb the cliff. Hand over hand he went up the dizzy heights, catching first one bush and then another, planting his feet on those his hands released.

The outlaws quickly divined his desperate purpose and set up a frantic yelling, at the same time discharging their revolvers, in hopes of causing him, through excitement, to lose his footing and fall. But Dagger Don was not disconcerted. Their yells and firing, instead of confusing him, only nerved him to extra exertions, and like a squirrel he glided up the acclivity, fully aware of the terrible fact that one misstep, one broken hold, would hurl him to certain death below.

Never looking down, but always up at the diminishing height, he swung upward from bush to bush—at times having to reach out to his utmost for a hold above—at times dangling for a moment to a bending bush or tree, in mid-air, and that, too, while now the outlaws' bullets were whistling and "spatting" around him.

It was indeed a trying moment. Not one person in ten thousand would have dared the feat, for the chances of success were, it would seem, but one in ten thousand; but, the indomitable young Freelance accepted that chance and—won!

In spite of the fusilades and yells of the outlaws he succeeded in reaching a narrow table-rock or ledge from which further ascent was up a gradual slope. As he leaped upon this rock, he uttered a taunting yell, stepped back out of sight of the infuriated and outwitted outlaws, and sat down to rest. He could plainly hear the baffled villains in the pass below, and, as a faint smile lit up his fine face, he laid his hand on his breast, and said to himself:

"The five thousand dollars are safe yet!"

Having rested a few minutes he continued his ascent, but was no longer in sight of the foe and, for the time being, at least, he was once more out of danger. But he was now many miles out of his course; he was minus his horse; and his journey to Clark's Ranch must be made on foot.

Nothing daunted, however, he pushed on over the ridge in a northwesterly direction.

He wondered whether the outlaws would make another attempt to run him down, and whether they knew of his carrying the Reel Brothers' money. If they did, how had they gained the information?

He hurried on over the rough trail. The hours passed and about sunset he struck a goat-path winding among the hills. Into this he turned, and, following it, finally found himself descending a long, steep hill which terminated in Bear Canyon, through which lay his route to Clark's Ranch. The goat-path he knew ran down to a spring or little pool at the base of the hill.

By the time he had reached the spring it was quite dark. Stopping he slaked his thirst and washed his face and hands, and, thus refreshed, was about to resume his tramp when he heard the sound of hoofs coming up the valley.

"Surely it can't be my old outlaw friends," the scout mused; "for the ride back from where I left them around to this spot, would be all of twenty-five miles. They're coming close, whoever they be, and I'll take to cover, for they'll be apt to stop at the spring."

Don stepped into a thicket of pines but a rod from the spring, and as he had predicted, the horsemen halted at the spot, and they had not spoken a dozen words when he discovered that they were his late pursuers! He also learned, from their remarks, that they were going to stop there for the night, for the reason that their horses were completely fagged out with hard riding.

Having watered the animals they led them into the very thicket where Don was concealed, and hitched them, leaving them bridled and saddled, for there was no grass to be had within miles of that spot.

Donald still remained in the thicket within twenty feet of the horses, and when the five outlaws went back and sat down near the spring, he crept as close as safety would warrant, and gave ear to their conversation.

He soon learned, that his name was being mentioned with profane emphasis, and when he heard them speaking of "the money," he was satisfied that they knew of the treasure he carried, and that they had not giving up the hope of securing it.

Barr was really sorry their horses were so exhausted, for it would have been an easy matter to secure one for his own use. As it was, he could not resist the temptation to annoy the villains before leaving them again. He possessed no knife but his pocket jack-knife. Opening this, he advanced toward the horses cautiously so as not to scare them. The first he reached was so tired that it scarcely moved when he came up.

Feeling along the animal's belly for the cinch, Don proceeded to cut the band into several pieces, but leaving the saddle on the back. Each of the other four he treated in like manner. This done, he gave each horse a second visit and cut the bridles into several pieces, thus liberating the poor beasts.

This done, the daring Don crept back to his eavesdropping position to await results. One of the horses, finding itself loose, walked out of the thicket and came toward the spring, a low limb brushing its saddle off just as it came out of the copse.

The crash of the falling saddle, and the presence of the loose horse called for an investigation, and five minutes later the atmosphere thereabouts was sulphurous with profanity.

"Men, I'll bet a thousand dollars," one of the villains exclaimed, "this is the work of that young devil, Dagger Don, who may be con-

cealed in the darkness within hearing of us this minute!"

Don could scarcely resist the temptation to shout; but, deciding that discretion would avail him more, he kept quiet and listened.

This, however, finally became monotonous to the impulsive fellow and he quietly took his departure.

When out in the canyon with his face once more turned in the direction of Clark's Ranch, he again tapped with his finger the package in the bosom of his buckskin shirt, and again exclaimed to himself:

"And still the five thousand dollars and Dagger Don sojourn together."

CHAPTER V.

VAGABOND JOSH.

"GEERUSALIM, my happy home! what has struck Rainbow Camp? Look, Lundy, and tell me what that thar percession might be called?"

The speaker was Tobe Kahn, the proprietor of the principal saloon in the little mining-camp of Rainbow, and the object to which he called the attention of his bartender was a strange horseman coming up the street at a snail's gait.

It was about the middle of the afternoon, and at that hour most of the male population were away at work, or asleep, and so the place presented a quiet and almost lifeless appearance. But this merely happened so at that particular time, for Rainbow was usually a lively little camp—more so at night than in daytime. The place numbered perhaps four-score persons, good, bad and indifferent—male and female. It had its usual complement of saloons and card-tables and, as a consequence, the usual amount of drinking, gambling and shooting.

Within the past month, however, the place had undertaken a regeneration. This was in honor of the coming of Colonel Allen Rodman and his beautiful daughter, Millie, to spend the summer in the healthful atmosphere of Rainbow Camp, and, as the moral atmosphere of the place was not what it should be in a health resort, the town had undertaken to "clean up"—that is, an ordinance had been issued which forbade the presence of all bummers, and such men as had no visible means of support. Of course this did not include gamblers, or any one who had money to pay his way. Money was the standard by which all were to be judged under this ordinance; and from the appearance of the approaching horseman, Tobe Kahn made up his mind the fellow was of the forbidden class.

"He looks very much like a ragamuffin parade," Lundy Barker responded, after surveying the stranger for a moment.

"He is a gay trooper as ever struck this camp, by the shades of Don Quixote!" declared Old Tobe. "I reckon some one'll have to call on him and read him the 'Bum Ordinance.'"

On the side of the street opposite Tobe Kahn's was a hotel, a long row of log-houses joined together, bearing the aristocratic name, painted on a sixteen-foot plank, of "Hotel de Raynbeau."

Up to the door of this hostelry rode the stranger and dismounted, and as time hung heavy on the hands of Tobe Kahn, he walked over to the "Raynbeau" to take a look at the new-comer.

To his surprise he found he was a boy—a youth whose age might have been anywhere from sixteen to twenty years. He was rather slender in build, stoop-shouldered, with a downcast and furtive glance, and a face known as an Indian's and quite as dirty.

He was dressed in a ragged, slouchy suit, or rather parts of different suits, that fitted him in ill manner. His toes were visible through holes in his shoes, as was a tuft of carrot hair through a hole in the apex of an old brown, felt hat "gone to seed." Besides a pair of old-fashioned horse-pistols in his belt, he carried a rusty butcher-knife with the long, dull and nicked blade exposed.

His mount, although poor and long-limbed, made a little better appearance than he, in that it was caparisoned with a good saddle and bridle.

"Hullo, stranger! good afternoon!" exclaimed Tobe Kahn, as he confronted the youth at the door of the hotel.

"How'd do?" was the stranger's response, given in a low, drawling, and listless tone.

"Be you travelin' or goin' som'eres?" Kahn inquired.

"I'm travelin'," was the reply.

At this juncture Hank March, the proprietor of the hotel, appeared at the door, and, a moment later, Lundy Barker joined the crowd.

"Well, what's the go now?" demanded

March, glancing first at the stranger and then at Kahn.

"Oh, you've got a distinguished guest," answered Tobe; "send around your hostlers, and you show this young cavalier to the best room in the 'Raynbeau,' and furnish him plenty of soap and water."

"Are you goin' to pay the bill?" questioned March of Tobe.

"When I agree to I will," responded the officious Kahn.

"I reckon you read that notice, did you, boy, posted on a tree down the valley?" March asked.

"Didn't see any notice," answered the youth.

"It's a warnin' to bums and deadbeats not to trespass on these grounds," added Lundy Barker.

"Well, who are you, anyhow?" queried March.

"Joshua Farmer's my name," returned the young stranger.

"Dimpled thunder!" exclaimed Lundy Barker, "I'll bet that's the same feller Dick Pullman war tellin' us 'bout bein' run out o' Deadman's Bar. They called him Vagabond Josh."

"Wal, I should say the name applied," observed Kahn; "but say, boy, what do you do for a livin'—what do you want here? Are you Vagabond Josh?"

"I s'pose I am," was the honest confession, "but I've got money to pay for my dinner and horse-feed."

"Whar did you git it?" asked Kahn, with a wink at March.

"They give it to me at Deadman's Bar," was the naive confession.

"Oh, they give you money to leave, eh? Well, we don't do that up here; we ride 'em out on a rail, and, as you've got your own rail we'd advise you to git your bite and git away afore the miners all come around."

Hank March led the way into the hotel, and set the boy out a cold lunch, which he ate in quiet. Then, to the surprise of all, he offered in payment a five-dollar gold coin.

March handed him back four dollars in change, at the same time tipping a wink at Tobe Kahn.

The boy counted the change, and then, for the first time, looked up.

"You've charged me too much," he said.

"Well now," retorted March, with assumed anger, "who's runnin' a second-class hotel in this camp, I'd like to know? But, here's another half-dollar. Take it and git out of my house before you infest it with vermin!"

The boy buried his change in the depths of his rags and turned toward the door, saying:

"From the looks of things your ole house's already infested."

Tobe and Lundy indulged in an outburst of laughter at the boy's apparently unconscious sarcasm; then turning to his barkeeper, Tobe said:

"Lundy, that's too much money to leave this camp. I think he's enough to exclude him from the pervisions o' the Bum Ordinance. At any rate we ort to have some o' it. Go out and coax him over to the saloon."

Lundy hastened after the vagabond. He found him standing by his horse, gazing up and down the street as if undecided which way to go.

Tobe and Hank watched proceedings from the window. What Lundy said to the boy they did not hear, but, presently, they saw the two—Lundy and the lad—start off, arm in arm, toward the saloon.

CHAPTER VI.

VAGABOND JOSH DECLINES A DRINK.

TOBE KAHN and Hank March followed over to the saloon. When they entered Lundy was behind the bar and two glasses filled with liquor were standing on the counter.

"Fill up two more," shouted Tobe as they came up, "and we'll all drink at the expense, and to the health, o' Vagabond Joshua."

"Huh! he refused to drink even with me," declared Barker, as he proceeded to fill two more glasses, "but I reckon—Hello! there comes Taos Tim, the little terror! He's a noso like a hound when thar's an initiation on hand."

A fifth man had come bounding into the room, smacking his lips expectantly as he approached the bar.

This man was known as Taos Tim. He was some thirty years of age, rather under the medium in size, with black, sinister eyes and a complexion suggestive of Mexican blood. He was a quarrelsome, quick-tempered man—the fighting man of the camp, who was tolerated only through fear, for he had quite a following

in Rainbow Camp. More than one man had lost his life in daring to cross this desperado's path. He had a way of intimidating men—especially strangers, that convinced Lundy Barker the young vagabond would not long hesitate in deciding to drink and spend some of his money when confronted by Taos Tim, the little terror.

The bully approached the bar, scrutinizing the boy with a wolfish look, and was about to make some remark when Tobe Kahn said:

"That's a new-comer, Taos, and 'cordin' to the custom of this camp he's goin' to set up the drinks, and 's got the minted metal to pay for 'em."

"Gentlemen," said the boy in a tone of decided firmness, "I repeat that I didn't come here to drink or treat. I was invited here by that man who said he wished to give me some advice. I have only a little money and don't mean to spend it for liquor."

"Ba-h-h!" bawled out Taos Tim, glaring into the boy's face; "come off, kid! You be a tenderfoot! Brace up and be a man all over! Prohibition's makin' a chump o' you! Fire up, and you'll bloom into manhood a rustler. Come up and let's drink to each other's eternal welfare."

"I decline to drink or spend my money for liquor," was the boy's reply.

"But you shall," declared the bully, taking the youth by the shoulder and pulling him up to the bar; "come up to the trough and drown your verdancy."

"You can't make me drink, I tell you that," declared the boy, determinedly.

"Oh! but I will, though! I'll hold your classic nose and pour it down your gullet!"

"Don't dare to!" exclaimed Josh, showing signs of rising anger.

Taos Tim made a grab at the boy's nose, but Josh eluded him and at the same time struck him a light blow in the face.

This was enough to arouse the vengeance of the bully of Rainbow, and with a frightful oath he charged upon the young vagabond with clinched fist.

"Young varmint!" he fairly roared in rage, "I'll break your neck! Git down on your knees and beg my pardon or I'll destroy you! Down, vagabond, and beg for mercy!"

"I'm no coward—I can defend myself," calmly responded the youth, in a tone most exasperating to the bully.

"Oh! you can, can you? Then you want to fight me?" Taos Tim exclaimed.

"I do not unless I have to," responded Josh.

"You have to, or—I'll—"

"So be it, then," interrupted the boy.

"Name your weapons."

"Knives!" announced Josh, to the astonishment of all.

"Knives!" repeated the bully with a sneer of disdain, "you want to fight me with knives, eh? Why, I've carved up grizzlies in a fair fight. Knives are my delight, you young idiot, and I'll slash you to ribbons in a holy whoop. You won't be a mouthful. You'd better select somethin' else, for I wants you to have a little show, I want to be fair 'cause you're a tender bulb. I want to git at least one scratch on me for a tally. If I can't show a mark for every man I've did up, some feller 'll be callin' me a liar some day and git carved. Choose shot-guns, or rocks or somethin' that'll give you a chance."

"Knives!" repeated the youth, and Hank March and Tobe Kahn began to see something cropping out in vagabond Josh that was not all verdancy.

"Knives it is, then!" declared Taos Tim; "Lundy Barker, git a box to gather the young cuss up in after I make one o' my fancy slashes; come out in the street, young greeny, where there's plenty room, and where all can see that I give you a fair deal."

Taos Tim walked out into the street ready to fight.

Hank March turned to Josh and said:

"Boy, you'd better 'polagize than fight that man, for he'll kill you fu'st rap. He's a tiger-terror and 's killed two men in this camp in knife-duels and sca'cely got a scratch. You're only a young man—a boy, in fact, and 'll stand no show."

"I'm older than I seem," Josh replied, "and I'm not a coward. If that man has got to have his way—an apology or a fight—I prefer the fight, because if I should make an apology he'd trample me under foot the next minute. I thank you for your suggestion, and while I can't act upon it, I hope you'll see that I have an equal show. That's all I ask. I may go under, but if I do go down it 'll be dead—not on my knees to that man."

"Boy, your blood be upon your own head," said March; "but do you mean to fight with that butcher-knife?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're crazy, by thunder!"

"Perhaps I am."

The yells of Taos Tim had, by this time, brought nearly half the camp into the street in front of the saloon to learn the cause of his excitement, and when it was announced that Tim was going to fight a knife-duel, the excitement rose to fever heat.

Throwing off his coat and hat, Vagabond Josh stepped out into the street.

"Dimpled thunder!" exclaimed Tobe Kahn, in surprise at the change in the youth's appearance, "he's a singed cat sure'n shootin'! D'ye see that hump's gone outen his back? His head's up like a young buck's, and his eyes are all aflame. He's several inches taller, I do believe, and looks five years older. I'll bet he's game as a terrier pup."

"S'pose he is, what can he do fightin' an old wildcat veteran like Taos Tim, and that too with an old butcher-knife?" replied Barker; "I tell ye it looks like a burning shame to 'low Taos to murder him. But then he's been warned, so he'll have no one to blame."

A look of surprise and disappointment followed the appearance of Vagabond Josh from the saloon. The miners had hoped to see a man worthy of Taos Tim's steel; but as for the slender youngster, they made up their minds he would be slain in cold blood.

Many were the protests that went up against Taos Tim fighting him. "He's not yer equal," "he's only a tenderfoot," "it'll be a disgrace to Taos Tim and Rainbow Camp to kill him," were some of the protestations.

"He insulted me and refuses to 'pologize," roared Taos Tim, waving his hand, in which he clutched a murderous-looking knife above his head.

Considerable wrangling ensued. The crowd was divided as to the fight being permitted to take place. The majority of the miners were in favor of the fight, and these were Tim's friends.

While the crowd was still discussing the matter, the clatter of hoofs and roll of wheels were heard coming down the street.

A light "buck-board," drawn by a pair of bronchos, was seen approaching. In it were seated a man and woman. They were Colonel Allen Rodman and his pretty daughter, Millie, who had now been residents of Rainbow Camp nearly six weeks.

The colonel was looking unusually well. It was evident the mountain air was doing him great good; and, as for Millie, she was the same pretty, bright-faced girl. No one seeing her that evening would ever have thought she had known trouble—that even then a great shadow hung over her young heart, threatening a life of deepest gloom.

As the colonel turned out to pass around the crowd, he stopped to inquire the cause of the excitement.

A miner informed him that a duel was about to be fought between Taos Tim and a young stranger. Then he pointed out Vagabond Josh to him.

The youth stood with his back toward them, but with knitted brows Colonel Rodman looked at him steadily for several moments in hopes he might catch a glimpse of his face.

"It looks like a shame," the miner went on, "to see the young feller cut to pieces by Taos."

"Who is he, anyhow?" asked Rodman, unable to get a sight of his face.

"Don't know more'n some one called him Vagabond Josh," the miner answered.

"Father," said Millie, a look of pity on her face, "do not let them murder him."

"What have I to say about it, child?" the father responded. "If he is impudent enough to come here and insult some one, he will have to take the consequence."

"But, father," pleaded the maiden, "the miner says he is only a young man—a boy—and I know the men would respect your appeal in his behalf."

"Millie," the colonel said in a gentle, reproving tone, "you seem to forget we are the honored guests of these miners, and have no right to meddle in their affairs."

"Then I shall make a personal appeal to them myself," declared Millie, all the tender sympathy of her woman's nature aroused in the youth's behalf.

"Not one word, Millie," said her father firmly, and touching up his ponies he drove on.

"Oh, father! do not leave!" burst in earnest, pleading tones from the girl's lips; but the stern man was deaf to her appeal, and drove on.

After passing the crowd Millie glanced back. The boy was looking after them. His eyes and Millie's met, and he bowed as if in recognition of the look of sympathy upon her fair face.

A cry burst from Millie's lips as though a terrible pain had suddenly pierced her heart. It alarmed her father, and he was thinking of turning back with her when she mastered her emotions, and prevailed on him to go on.

As if inspired by the maiden's glance, Vagabond Josh determined to end the wrangling of the crowd, and in a clear voice he spoke thus:

"Men, you who appear to be my friends need not let my years appeal to your sympathy. I assume all risks in fighting that parched-skin bully. I'm no tenderfoot."

"That settles it," declared Hank March, letting go all holds. "He seems to want to fight, and will fight, and, by Jinks! shall fight now."

"Draw your ole butcher-knife," yelled Curly Bill, Taos Tim's second.

"Lundy Barker," said Taos Tim, "you give the signal, and I'll make quick work o' it, and I'll not sp'ile the corpse, either."

"Give the youngster a decent knife!" shouted out a young miner whose sympathy was for the boy.

"Yes, I'd give him mine," said Taos Tim, "if I only had a pocket-knife handy."

A miner advanced and offered Josh a bright, keen-edged knife, but the youth declined it with a smiling "Thank you."

"Fall back, gents, fall back," Lundy Barker now shouted, and the crowd falling back, an open space of twenty feet was between the duelists.

Then Barker stepped out in sight of both and shouted:

"Men, make ready!"

Instantly, almost, there was heard the clearing of steel and at the same moment Vagabond Josh threw up his hand in which flashed the long, polished blade of a rapier-like knife!

CHAPTER VII.

THE DUEL.

A THRILL of joy shot through the breasts of Vagabond Josh's few sympathizers when they saw the youth snatch from the much derided butcher-knife—which was nothing less than a metallic shield—the flashing blade he held aloft ready to strike. To Taos Tim it was evidently an unpleasant surprise, for the sneering remark he made was not so fraught with bravado.

Half a minute perhaps had elapsed when Lundy Barker exclaimed:

"One!"

The crowd mechanically shrunk back, and Taos Tim's body settled slightly like a tiger preparing for a spring, while Vagabond Josh stood erect like a Roman gladiator, one foot thrown forward, his side turned quartering to his adversary, his right arm and shoulder thrown back, his hand raised above his head, his knife pointing upward.

"Two!" fell from Barker's lips and every heart almost ceased to beat.

"Three!"

Taos Tim leaped forward with a yell. The hand of Vagabond Josh was flung forward with lightning force; there was a flash in the air, and Taos Tim stopped suddenly when half across the ring, dropped his knife and clutched frantically at his breast into which, to the very guards, Vagabond Josh had driven his terrible weapon.

A horrible cry burst from the wretched man's lips, and as Curly Bill sprang forward and pulled the knife from his breast, a stream of red blood leaped out after it, and with a moan the bully of Rainbow sunk down lifeless.

For several moments the miners stood aghast with horror and surprise. They could not realize that a death-blow had been dealt—that the boy, never moving out of his tracks, had slain Taos Tim—that he had thrown his knife with such wonderful accuracy as to plant it in the desperado's heart.

"It was foul! it was foul!" burst from Curly Bill's lips when he discovered his friend Tim was dead.

"It was fair! it was fair!" hurled back the friends of the boy.

As the friends of the dead gathered around the body, the sullen murmur of a rising storm was heard, and going to Josh, Hank March took him by the arm and led him into the saloon, saying:

"Joshua, you're a trump, a jewel—all but a vagabond; but you'll be killed if you stay here. Take the advice of one whose friendship you've won by manly skill and courage, and leave here at once."

"I thank you, sir," the boy replied, "for your kind advice, and, while I would be willing to

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fight Taos Tim's friends, one at a time, I will leave camp."

The youth put on his coat and hat and then escorted by his friends, proceeded across the street to where his horse stood and, mounting the animal, gathered up the reins, saying to the friends around him:

"Again to my friends I say 'Thank you,' to the friends of Taos Tim, the great man-carver, please give them the compliments of Dagger Don."

And having thus spoken, he rode away at a lively gallop down the canyon, leaving even his friends in profound surprise and astonishment.

"Dimpled thunder!" exclaimed Tobe Kahn, "can it be he told the truth 'bout bein' that young dare-devil, Dagger Don?"

"I should say he'd proven the title clear, in downin' our Taos Tim as he did," answered March.

"Then we've all been gloriously deceived!" declared Tobe, "and if Dagger Don is Red Dagger, as I've heard he war, there'll be trouble in this camp, for he'll have his band here next time he comes. And another thing, March; the stage, long since due, is not in yit and it may never git in. If that's Red Dagger he's not here for his health; and, that reminds me that Colonel Rodman and his daughter are down the canyon, also. Hank, I'm goin' to warn the camp."

And he did so, and in the midst of the excitement that followed, Colonel Rodman and his daughter returned from their drive, much to the relief of the miners.

The colonel drew up to the first man he met and inquired how the duel came out.

"Taos was killed!" the miner answered sorrowfully; "the feller he fit t'rew his knife and stuck Jim through the heart. He's old in years and crime, and when he rode off he coolly informed the miners 'round him that he war that notorious—"

"Dagger Don?" exclaimed the colonel.

"Yes; did you meet him, colonel? He rode down the pass."

"No; he must have turned into some by-way and rode off into the hills. But I mistrusted that the fellow was that young villain when I drove past a while ago. If I'd taken the time to have looked him in the face, I might have saved the camp some trouble. But I warn this camp to be on its guard, or some day he'll ride in here at the head of his band and clean out the place."

Having thus expressed himself the colonel drove on toward his cabin, which was located on a little elevation at the extreme north end of the camp, and some forty rods from that of the nearest miner.

Half an hour later, when seated in their home, Rodman turned to Millie and said:

"Millie, you recognized that boy to-day, didn't you?"

"What makes you think so, father?" the girl replied, evasively.

"Your actions, your eagerness to interfere in his behalf," he answered.

"Well, people may say what they please; I do not believe he is Red Dagger the outlaw," Millie said.

"Millie, how did you learn that he had not been killed by the masked outlaw that morning near the ranch?"

"Father, I am not a fool," the girl responded with some feeling; "I have known all along that that masked highwayman was your ranch foreman, and that Donald Barr slew him."

Colonel Rodman was startled by this revelation, for he had supposed his daughter was in entire ignorance of the death of his foreman, Dave Bascom.

"Girl," he finally exclaimed, "I hope you have not been corresponding with Don Barr, and been the instrument of his coming to this camp. Surely you have not forgotten that we are daily expecting Horace Davenport, your affianced husband, to join us here, and—"

"I forget nothing, father," the girl broke in, impatiently; "I only wish I could forget much that is fresh in my mind."

"Millie, I do hope, when Mr. Davenport comes, you'll not offend him. Remember, it's only a week until your wedding day, and it would be a pretty state of affairs to spoil all your future prospects by an inadvertent word or act."

Millie made no reply to these words of caution, and after a few moments' pause, Rodman went on:

"I am sorely uneasy about the stage-coach. It is now nearly dark and it has not arrived yet, and I am afraid it has fallen into the hands of the road-agents, and if Horace Davenport should be aboard, God only knows what may happen

him if he should be recognized as the wealthy young banker of Trinidad."

Rainbow Camp had all the excitement now it could wish, and as the shadows of night stretched out across the valley, crept up the hillsides and shrouded the bluffs and peaks in gloom, fear and uneasiness pervaded every breast, and the names of Red Dagger and Dagger Don were upon every lip.

The tri-weekly stage, hours overdue, finally came rattling into camp and drew up before the Hotel de Raynbeau.

The excited shouts of the driver soon brought half the camp around him, and before leaving the box he gave a detailed account of an attack on his stage by road-agents a few miles down the canyon, the robbery of the passengers and mail-bag, with the more startling information that one of the three gentlemen passengers was carried off by the outlaws into the hills.

The driver's story was fully corroborated by the two passengers that had got through, and when they had told their story also, Colonel Rodman pushed his way through the crowd until he stood in the presence of the men, of whom he excitedly asked:

"Did you learn the name of the man the robbers carried off, gentlemen?"

"He was a young banker of Trinidad, Horace Davenport," answered one of them.

A groan burst from the colonel's lips, he staggered back, made his way out of the crowd, and hastened back to his cabin, a despondent, half-crazed man.

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL RODMAN IN A RAGE.

WHEN Allen Rodman reached his cabin he found Millie awaiting him, and throwing his hat aside he dropped into a chair, pale, trembling and excited, saying:

"Well, the worst has happened, the stage was attacked and the passengers not only robbed, but Horace Davenport was carried off into the hills by the outlaws!"

"Oh, father! is it possible?" Millie cried, as if her heart had been wrung by the terrible news.

"Yes, it is; and what have you to say now about Donald Barr not being Red Dagger?"

"What I have always said," replied the girl, with emphasis; "I still believe Donald is no outlaw!"

"Millie, you've been a fool long enough," the old man exclaimed, in anger, "and it's time now you dismissed all thoughts of that young scoundrel from your mind, for I'm of the opinion that crime has already been added to your silly admiration for that fellow."

"Father! do you accuse me of crime?" cried Millie, her face deathly pale; "what do you mean by such cruel words?"

"What brought that fellow here into this camp in disguise unless it was through your connivance? And why has the coach been robbed just at this time, and Davenport carried off a prisoner, unless the young devil had known of Horace's coming to—to wed you, and meant to thwart our plans? I tell you it looks suspicious, Millie, devilish suspicious!"

"I care not how it looks so long as I am entirely innocent of any wrong in the matter," Millie replied. "I have hoped and prayed, I will confess, to be delivered from the cruel bondage into which you would force me with Horace Davenport, and if I thought he was acting with a full knowledge of my feelings toward him, I should not pity him one bit in his getting into trouble. But I have always regarded him as a gentleman, and treated him as such, but I do not love him."

"Millie, let me tell you," said the colonel, "that if Horace Davenport is dead I will be financially ruined."

"Then it's for gold you're selling me to the young banker?" retorted the girl, with flashing eyes and lips curling with scorn; "and yet you, father, accuse me of crime!"

"Mr. Davenport," the old man went on in a more pacific mood, "was to bring me twenty-five thousand dollars when he came. All that, I presume, Red Dagger has got, and I repeat, that if Davenport is dead, I'm a ruined man, let the blame lie where it will."

"Father, you wrong both Donald Barr and myself, and if there is a conspiracy against you and Mr. Davenport, it has its origin outside of my friendship for Donald."

To this the colonel made no reply, but rising to his feet began pacing the floor like a man to whose mind had suddenly come a painful thought.

And while he was still walking the floor, a miner called at the cabin and invited him to attend a meeting at the "Raynbeau" for the purpose of organizing a Vigilance Committee, and take such other necessary steps as would insure them against danger.

The colonel accepted the invitation and taking his hat went away with the miner in no very pleasant frame of mind.

Millie went into the kitchen and sat down by their old colored servant, Aunt Martha, and told her of the stage robbery and, what to her seemed a mystery, of the abduction of Horace Davenport.

While thus engaged Miss Frank Brenton came in to spend the evening with her. Miss Brenton was the daughter of a miner. She was a girl of seventeen with brown eyes, a pretty, intelligent face, and slender graceful form. Being a bright and merry-hearted girl, Millie had become greatly attached to her and she to Millie, and there was scarcely a day or night passed but what they were together at the home of one or the other.

Frank remained until Colonel Rodman came home and then Millie accompanied her part of the way to her father's cabin, which was the nearest one to the Rodman domicile.

When Millie came back her father had gone to bed, for it was nearly midnight, and she at once retired, herself.

Early the next morning the colonel was up, and having drank a cup of coffee went off downtown.

An hour or two after his departure a stranger rode down the valley and drew rein at the door of the Rodman cabin. He was a man of perhaps thirty years, of medium size, straight as an Indian and dressed in the rather handsome suit of a ranchero. He had dark, gray eyes and black hair and mustache, and would have been considered a handsome fellow but for the dark circles around his eyes, and the red, purple spot on either cheek—evidence of dissipation.

Millie, unaware of his presence, stepped to the door just as he drew rein.

The stranger politely lifted his hat and with a courtly bow, said:

"Beg pardon, miss; but a pleasant morning to you."

With some confusion Millie returned his salutation, his gentlemanly bearing soon setting her at ease.

"May I inquire if this is the home of Allen Rodman?" the stranger asked.

"Yes, sir; but he is not at home. He walked down into camp an hour ago," Millie answered.

"Thank you. I desire to see him on important business, but as I am tired and hungry from hard riding and long fasting, I will ride down to the hotel and take lodgings, and call again this afternoon."

"Who shall I tell father called?" Millie asked.

"Winfield Kirby," answered the man, and touching his hat he rode away down the street.

When the colonel came home at noon Millie told him of her caller.

"I met the gentleman down at the hotel," Rodman said, "and he will call this evening after dark for a private talk on some business matters."

"Who is he anyhow, father?"

"Winfield Kirby is all I know. He would not talk in the presence of the miners and loafers that surrounded him as though he were some great show. He has plenty of money and is spending it lavishly at Tobe Kahn's, and of course that will draw an admiring crowd any time. But he appears to be a royal, courtly fellow, and I hope his business with me will be of profit to me, as he intimated it would. Don't forget, Millie, that he desires a strictly private interview."

"Very well, father, after dinner is over Aunt Martha and I will go down to Mr. Brenton's. Frankie and I had planned a little jaunt on foot up to Rainbow Falls this afternoon, and when we return, I will remain over night with her, and keep Aunt Martha there, also. That will give you clear sailing."

And so about two o'clock Millie and the old servant went down to John Brenton's cabin, and, an hour later, the two girls, Millie and Frank, started off up the valley on their trip to Rainbow Falls.

CHAPTER IX.

WINFIELD KIRBY CALLS.

AT the appointed hour Winfield Kirby made his appearance at Rodman's cabin, flung his hat on the floor, seated himself, and with the easy

familiarity of an old acquaintance said, as he looked around the room:

"You seem to be all alone, colonel."

"Entirely, sir," answered Rodman, placing a lighted lamp on the table beside which Kirby sat, while he took a seat opposite; "my daughter and servant are away on a visit, and we're alone."

"Well, colonel, Rainbow is a nervous little camp, isn't it? The killing of that Taos Timothy by Dagger Don yesterday is a nine-days' sensation," the courtly Winfield said; "I'll venture the assertion that that affair has cost me twenty dollars, at least."

"How is that, Mr. Kirby?" asked the colonel.

"Why, every man in camp wanted to tell me about the duel, and after I'd listened to fourteen different versions of it, the story began to grow monotonous, and finally, whenever a man began to talk about it, I'd go to work and fill him up with liquor so full he couldn't talk and thereby shut him off. And several of them wanted to be shut off, too."

Colonel Rodman broke into a good-natured laugh, for it was quite apparent to him that while that facetious gentleman was "shutting off" the miners, he had "taken on" a slight degree of mellowness himself.

"Now, over at Smoky Flats," Kirby went on after a moment's pause, "it used to be that if a man wasn't killed every day there was a kind of 'goneness' felt by the populace. Was you ever at Smoky Flats, colonel?"

"No, but I have an old friend living there now," replied Rodman. "Perhaps you know him; his name is Dolby—Sam Dolby."

"Well!" exclaimed Kirby, "I should say I did know him. Sam Dolby's my father!"

"What?" exclaimed Rodman, "I never knew he had a son!"

"Well, I'm not exactly his real son, but his step-son. He married my mother," explained the man.

"Indeed? well! well! How is he, anyhow?"

"Dead!" was the laconic reply.

"Dead!" exclaimed Rodman; "Sam Dolby dead?"

"Dad's dead, colonel," repeated the man in a light, unfeeling tone, and after a moment's pause, during which he closely eyed the colonel, he went on, "he was murdered in cold blood!"

"Murdered! Sam Dolby murdered!" the colonel repeated in evident sadness.

"Yes, a fellow—a thug—came to his cabin one evening to rob him, and dad being no coward, if he was old and wind-shaken, bounced him in a holy twinkle and they waded into each other hammer and tongs. Like Dagger Don and Taos Tim they fought with knives, and the result was both were laid out. The thug died in about an hour and my paw departed hence about two hours thereafter. Now, it happened that I dropped in a few minutes after the fight had ended, and there the two lay about ten feet apart, bleeding, cussing and dying. The thug knew father had received a small remittance—a hundred dollars—from a friend that day, and that's what the villain wanted. And how do you suppose, colonel, he found out dad had received the money?"

"Indeed, I have no idea," answered Rodman.

"The pimple-faced rascal," Kirby went on, "confessed, before he died, that dad's friend had told him he was going to send the money, and suggested that he—the thug—lay for dad, and relieve him of the cash, and promised to add a hundred more to that sum if he—the thug—would relieve him—that's dad—of his necessity for any more money."

"What a friend that man must have been!" said the colonel, indignantly.

"Well, I should smile a ghastly grin he was," declared Kirby, elevating his booted feet on the table, and leaning back in his chair with an air of abandon. "But, colonel, before dad departed hence he made a confession, and darn my two eyes if it wasn't a stunner. Oh! I tell you, dad'd been a wild and woolly sinner in his days, and for the benefit of his orphan child—that's me—he admitted it like a man, and I'm proud of him for it, if he is dead. Why, he went away back to Old Kentucky and raked up an old scrape he'd been into, and told me many, and perhaps most, of the particulars."

Colonel Rodman moved restlessly in his chair, either from disgust of the man's heartless manner of speaking, or impatience for him to get through his story, and to business.

"Yes," the man went on, after another pause, "dad told me of a nasty job he and Beverly Ward did there shortly after the war. Pap and Beverly were chums, and in their town they were the leaders in all social and business affairs. They were rustlers, they were,

"But one day there came down from Ohio a couple of young fellows named Dayton and Armstrong, and settled in the same town, married two of Kentucky's proverbially pretty girls, went into business, and, with their enterprise and push, soon crowded dad and his chum, Beverly, back two or three notches."

"This was too much for their blue blood, and they made up to shut off the two Ohioans' popularity, and one day Beverly Ward filled Dayton's body with a fine load of buckshot, while passing through a deep, dark woods. The murder was charged up to his friend Armstrong, and then up bopped my paw and swore that he saw Armstrong shoot Dayton. Various things went to sustain his evidence. It was shown on trial that Dayton and Armstrong had had a little quarrel a day or two before. On the day of the killing Armstrong was out deer-hunting, with a double-barreled shot-gun. So poor Armstrong was sent up for life, and died a year after his incarceration."

"Now, as Beverly Ward had been reinstated as the smartest man in town by virtue of his shot-gun work, the court appointed him executor of Dayton's estate, and dad went on his bond. Together the two managed to pocket the bulk of the Yankee's fortune. And besides, Mrs. Dayton, dying of a broken heart, left a little girl babe, and Beverly got himself appointed the child's guardian and took her into his own home to raise, the generous, kind-hearted man."

"After getting all they could out of the business, both pulled up stakes and went to Texas, and from there to New Mexico, and the Lord only knows where else. Daddy was a failure at business after that murder, but he told me his friend Beverly coined money at every turn. It's an actual fact, he said Beverly went into the cattle business in New Mexico with nothing more than a pair of brindle steers and an outfit of branding tools, and in less than two years his herd had increased to several hundred head. Dad always thought his adopted daughter was Beverly's mascot."

"But in the midst of his good fortune Beverly has given dad money several times, and it was Bev. who sent him the last hundred, and then sent an assassin to steal it, and slug the old man. I guess Beverly was getting tired of handing out whenever dad appealed to him on the strength of their Kentucky friendship, and concluded to stop the business and calk the leak."

"Father told me he had written Beverly for five hundred dollars, but only received one hundred and a letter saying he—Beverly—was in a financial strait, but hoped to be in shape soon, and would then come down handsomely. He said his daughter was soon to be married to a gentleman whose name I forget, and that the gent would let him have twenty-five thousand dollars. He even stated the place and time the wedding would come off, so that paw might know, on or about, the time to expect a remittance. And now, colonel, you can probably guess what I'm coming to—to the point that you are Beverly Ward, the murderer of Dayton, and so forth!"

"Curse your black heart, Winfield Kirby!" and the gathering storm of rage burst in all its fury from the colonel's lips, "have you come here, drunken scoundrel, to—"

"Hold up, colonel," interrupted the audacious villain, shaking his finger at the infuriated old man, "remember you are up here in Rainbow Camp for your health; so don't let your angry passions rise, 'for vinegar never catches flies,' or you'll take a backset. 'Like father, like son,' is an old saying, and as my father kept mum, lo! those many years, so can I, even if you did make me a poor, lone orphan child by sending that thug to rob and kill my paternal dad."

"You expect to bleed me, you rattle-brained scamp!" the old man fairly hissed, his face white with rage.

"One bleed, colonel; only one lone bleed," calmly replied the smiling villain. "You have a lovely daughter—the daughter of Dayton, the man you buck-shot. Her face is a fortune. She has been well brought up and is quite a nice lady, thanks to your good wife now dead. But, colonel, I don't want her—I'm unworthy of so pure and noble a woman. Besides she is already betrothed to—to—ah! I have it!—to Horace Davenport, banker of Trinidad. All I ask of you is a little indorsement—your John Hancock on this bit of paper. It is a draft on the First National Bank of Denver payable to your order! I found it yesterday eve down the valley near where the bold, bad road-agents robbed the stage. I presume the robbers threw it away considering it worthless—the ignorant fellows."

"Curse you, Winfield Kirby! you are the robber, and you have murdered Horace Davenport!" cried the old man.

A cold, sardonic laugh escaped Kirby's lips, but not for a moment did he take his eyes off the colonel, nor his hand away from his belt.

"Colonel," he said, in reply to the old man's accusations, "you're pretty good on the guess. I'll confess I'm something of a robber—a real nice, genteel and affable one, though, and when I read your affectionate letter to Daddy Dolby, I made up my mind to have that wedding postponed; so, I laid for Davenport, and he's now my guest over in the hills. I'll confess it was a little mean, but as you'd promised my foster sire some of the price of your daughter's hand, as I took it, and he being dead, and I his lawful heir and assign, I thought I'd garnishee Davenport. I expected to find the cash in his possession, and if he'd had it, he wouldn't be over the hills now. But until this draft is cashed, I expect he'll have to tarry with us. So, all I ask of you, colonel, is your signature on the back of the paper. I brought pen and ink for fear you might not have such things handy. Just write 'Pay to the order of John R. Freebolt,' and then dash down your sig. below."

"And if I see fit to refuse?" exclaimed the excited old man.

"You know better, colonel," and the villain spoke with an earnestness such as he had not shown theretofore, at the same time laying a revolver on the table as a warning.

For a moment or two Rodman sat with downcast eyes and knitted brows, evidently in deep thought.

"That's right, colonel; think it all over and be quick, for some one might drop in," the cool, merciless scoundrel went on; "I've got the clinch on you now, but if there's any way to beat me after you have signed the draft, that will be all right with me. I don't look for you to sit still after I'm gone and not try to thwart me. That would be unreasonable to expect of as lively old rascal as you have been. I don't ask it of you—I ask nothing but your autograph, and if I don't get the cash that'll be my lookout."

In all his eventful life Allen Rodman had never met Winfield Kirby's equal for boldness and audacity. He had hesitated about indorsing the draft in hopes that some one would come in. In fact, it was the first night but what one or two miners, at least, had dropped in.

Seeing that no one came and that the villain was reading his very thoughts, he resolved to have the matter over with, and taking the pen he indorsed the paper, and shoving it across the table toward the smiling wretch, exclaimed:

"There, you accursed robber! I believe you are one of Red Dagger's infernal cut-throats!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the triumphant rascal, placing the paper in his pocket, "you're off there a little, colonel, for, to be honest with you, and all rogues should be with each other, I'll confess that I am the real, veritable Red Dagger, himself! So, now, you can make the most of it—sound the alarm; raise the nervous little camp; call out the troops, and the new Vigilance Committee; send for the famous young detective-scout and knife-thrower who was chased out of camp yesterday, and whom today you declared was Red Dagger—yes, marshal them all, and plunge into the hills—ride to Denver, ride to Trinidad, ride to the devil, but remember it's always catching before hanging. Yes," continued the villain, rising to his feet, "tell the miners who drank so freely at my expense that Red Dagger has come and gone. But don't lash yourself into a rage. Remember you are here for your health, colonel; and now, if you don't hear from me soon, write. I will now bid you good-night, for Red Dagger has spoken!"

"Then I will take the floor!" said a voice from without, and at the same time the door swung open and the lithe figure of a man crossed the threshold and confronted the outlaw with a cocked revolver leveled full upon the villain's breast!

CHAPTER X.

DAGGER DON TAKES TO THE HILLS.

AFTER his duel with Taos Tim, Donald Barr, for he Vagabond Josh was, rode rapidly away from Rainbow Camp down the valley. But as soon as he was out of sight of camp and immediate danger from the excited miners, he reined his horse down to a walk, and at this gait he proceeded a mile or so down the pass and then turned abruptly to the left and entered a narrow defile trending away among the eastern hills.

Up this he rode quite leisurely until the shadows of night deepened around him when again he turned aside into another pass which soon led him into a little open valley. Here he drew rein, and, dismounting, turned his horse loose to crop the short bunch grass, while he walked to a tree near by, from the crotch of which he took a bundle wrapped in a blanket. From this bundle he took a suit of clothes, threw off the garb of Vagabond Josh and donned that of Donald Barr. He had also a Winchester carbine, a brace of revolvers, and a belt of fixed ammunition hanging in the bush.

From this point the young detective-scout had set out for Rainbow Camp with the double object in view of seeing Millie Rodman, and looking through the camp for a notorious horse-thief supposed to be in hiding there.

After he had donned his suit and buckled his belt around him he spread his blanket on the ground and sat down upon it to rest and review the incidents of the day. It was quite gratifying to him that he had seen Millie, and felt certain notwithstanding his disguise, that she had recognized him. But he regretted his having been forced into a fight with Taos Tim in that he was compelled to leave camp before his mission as a detective had been accomplished.

Finally the youth stretched himself on the earth, drew his blanket over him and settled down for the night. But he could not go to sleep. He counted the stars in the blue vault above, he listened to the voices of the night, he planned his work for the morrow—all in vain hopes of wooing the gentle goddess.

Suddenly he saw his horse lift its head, prick up its ears and listen in a manner that quickly brought him to his feet.

Listening he heard the far-off pounding of horses' hoofs. Horsemen were coming up the defile from which he had turned—perhaps in search of him. This thought led to immediate action. Taking the discarded suit of Vagabond Josh he divided it into four parts. In these he quickly bound up his horse's feet, and with his carbine slung at his back, he stood at his horse's side ready to mount at a moment's warning.

With his head erect, his eyes flashing, and every faculty on the alert, he waited. He could hear the sound of the galloping hoofs coming nearer and nearer, making the noise of a troop of cavalry. And as it approached the entrance to the little park in which he stood, he held his hand on his horse's nose to prevent it neighing. But as luck would have it, the cavalcade swept on apast him—on up the defile.

Quickly the youth leaped into his saddle, rode out of the park into the canyon, and galloped away after the unknown horsemen, the muffled hoofs of his animal scarcely giving forth a sound.

On up the canyon he followed, keeping just within hearing of the unknown, every faculty on the alert.

Mile after mile slipped behind him. Deep into the hills he followed, until at last the sound of clattering hoofs ceased.

Drawing rein, he dismounted in the blackest of gloom. Hitching his horse, he walked stealthily up the canyon until the sound of voices fell upon his ears. Then he stopped to listen. A ray of light gleamed through the darkness, grew larger and brighter, until it had bloomed out into a glowing camp-fire.

The horsemen had halted for the night. But who were they—outlaws, soldiers, or rangers?

To decide the matter, Dagger Don crept up closer—so close that he could distinctly see the strangers. There were at least a dozen of them, and the first one he recognized was the notorious brigand and outlaw, Red Dagger. This settled the fact of the party being robbers; but it was not all he discovered—the villains had a prisoner in their power. He was a stranger to Donald, appeared to be a young man, was dressed in a citizen's suit of gray, and possessed a handsome, manly face, which at once appealed to the boy's sympathy, and his rescue now became the uppermost consideration in his mind.

But the odds were too great for the young scout to even think about effecting the stranger's release otherwise than by stratagem, and so he proceeded to make a note of the surroundings, as revealed by the light. But he found the outlaws had chosen a good position to guard against danger, and, owing to the extreme darkness in the canyon, he was afraid to attempt any further reconnaissance. So he sat down to wait and watch. Patience was one of his happy possessions. He was never in a hurry except when it was necessary, and then a steady nerve and cool brain supplied the expedients that the exigencies of the moment required.

Finally, seeing the outlaws had settled down for the night, he returned to his horse and led the animal up a ravine nearly a mile from the canyon and hitched it in a dense pine thicket. Here he also left his carbine, and belt of cartridges, and then returned to his watch over the outlaws' camp.

By this time most of the mountain freebooters had rolled themselves in their blankets and lain down to sleep. The prisoner had been furnished a blanket, and he, also, was lying down; but Don could see that his feet and hands were bound with a lariat, one end of which was tied to the wrist of a sleeping outlaw.

Two men, one above and one below camp, paced to and fro on guard, so the scout had little hopes of helping the prisoner out of his dilemma that night.

However, he continued to watch his chances. The hours wore on, the outlaws' camp-fire burned low and went out, and finally the stars began to pale in the beams of morning light. Down into the canyon crept the gray dawn, routing the lurking shadows and awakening slumbering nature.

But long enough before it was light Donald Barr had taken up a new position from whence he could watch, and yet not be seen. And there he ate a crust of bread and awaited developments in the robber-camp.

The outlaws ate their breakfast, also, giving the prisoner a share.

Then the young scout expected to see them prepare for departure, but with the single exception of their chief, none of them did so.

Red Dagger's horse was brought up, bridled and saddled, and after giving some orders that Don could not hear, he mounted and rode away.

After his departure the others seated themselves and it was apparent to Don that they intended to remain there awhile longer.

The villains occupied an open position in the canyon with a high, perpendicular bluff on the west. At the base of this bluff, still securely bound, sat their prisoner.

Don discovered with the coming of day that the outlaws' horses were hitched about twenty rods from camp in a good-sized "draw" on the east side of the canyon where grew some scant bunch-grass and bushes.

The young scout occupied a position on the summit of a sharp "hog-back" or ridge densely covered with stunted timber and underbrush. The spur of this hog-back extended into the canyon at right angles far enough to shut off a view of the horses from camp. To reach the animals their owners must go around this spur, and this one of them did every hour or so to see that they were all right.

As soon as Dagger Don discovered the situation—saw the men coming and going between camp and their horses—saw that he occupied a position almost midway between the men and horses, he quickly decided upon a plan of action for the rescue of the prisoner. It would be a hazardous undertaking he knew, with one chance in ten of succeeding, but that one chance he resolved to take.

CHAPTER XI.

DAGGER DON'S STRATAGEM.

WITH revolver in hand Dagger Don quietly stole down the ridge on which he was secreted in the direction of the outlaw's horses. At the edge of the draw some thirty feet from the animals he stopped, hiding in the bushes.

Here he awaited the coming of an outlaw to see after the horses. In the course of half an hour his patience was rewarded. A robber came briskly walking around the point and came up and looked over the animals, then turned to retrace his steps to camp.

At that moment Dagger Don stepped out and confronted him, knowing the spur of the ridge concealed them from view of the main party of freebooters.

"Hands up!" commanded Don sharply. The surprised villain started back, his hand dropping to his revolver; but this was exactly what Don expected—in fact, what he wanted, and made the move an excuse to fire which he did, shattering the outlaw's right arm.

A yell of pain and rage escaped the fellow's lips, and he started to run shouting, lustily for help. But a second shot from Don's revolver brought him down and silenced him forever. Then the young scout broke for the cover of the bushes, firing his revolver among the horses as he did so, and yelling like a wild Comanche.

The horses took fright and would have stampeded but for the fact they were all hitched.

As it was, they reared and plunged frantically and as they were tied with lariats so that they could crop the grass, they became tangled and wound up in each other's ropes.

Back into the bushes and up the hog-back to his old position Dagger Don hurried after doing all the mischief he could in the draw. And to his delight he saw the outlaws hurrying around the point on the double-quick, going to the help of their friend.

This was exactly what Don was maneuvering after, and it was even better than he had expected, for he saw that the prisoner had been left entirely alone in the excitement of the moment.

And now was the scout's time to strike, and well did he improve it. Down the ridge straight toward the fettered stranger he dashed, knife in hand. The prisoner saw him coming and, therefore, was not wholly surprised by his appearance, and so was in a measure prepared for what followed. Reaching the man's side, he stooped and severed his fetters, saying as he did so:

"Come, stranger, lively!"

And the stranger arose and staggered away after him, his limbs and body stiff and numb by his long confinement. But when the circulation of the blood had been fully restored, and this required but a few moments' action, he kept well at the heels of his young liberator.

Up the canyon and to the nearest point that would take them from view of the outlaws, Dagger Don led the way, without once looking back or speaking a word. And how long it was after their departure before the outwitted outlaws discovered their captive was gone, the fugitives never knew, but when nearly a mile from camp they could still hear them trying to quiet their excited horses.

Up the steep side of the canyon the young scout and the stranger climbed, and when they had reached the summit of the ridge Don stopped, saying:

"Take a little rest, stranger."

The man sunk down almost breathless, while Dagger Don, standing erect, held his hand to his ear and listened; but all was quiet down in the canyon, so far as he knew, and turning to the stranger, he said:

"Pard, I rather think we have given 'em the dodge in royal shape."

"I hope so," responded the man; "but it was a hazardous undertaking for one person, who, I should say, had scarcely attained the years of manhood."

"I'm young in years but old in experience," answered Don; "but I've been laying in sight of you fellers ever since you went into camp last night, and I got lonesome for somebody to talk to and made a strike. But, stranger, I presume you know whose company you've been keeping?"

"I do, most assuredly, my young friend," the man replied; "they are road agents—Red Dagger's gang of cut-throats. But what interests me most is the company I now find myself in here."

"I'm Donald Barr—some call me Dagger Don."

"The young detective-scout?"

"A sort of an outfit of that kind."

"Give me your hand," said the delighted man, springing to his feet. "I have heard of you and your performances before, and am under eternal obligations to you. The stage on which I was traveling to Rainbow Camp was stopped by those brigands, the passengers all robbed, and I, for some reason or other, carried off into these hills. Donald, my name is Horace Davenport, of Trinidad."

"Horace Davenport," repeated Dagger Don, releasing the man's hand, a momentary feeling of disappointment and repugnancy taking possession of him, for he had no sooner heard the name than he realized that he stood in the presence of his rival—the man whom Colonel Rodman was determined his daughter should marry. But one square look into Horace Davenport's clear, expressive eyes and noble, manly face, banished all the repelling forces from his breast, while all the nobler and generous impulses of his nature quickly asserted themselves, and he again took the man's hand in a warm and friendly grasp, saying:

"Oh, yes! I believe I have heard Miss Rodman speak of you."

If Davenport had at first noticed the boy's coldness of expression when he announced his name, and the sudden change to genial warmth, he was too sensible and considerate to make any observation about it; for, without a doubt, he knew that Donald Barr was his rival and, therefore, the cause of his momentary embarrassment.

The situation was, indeed, a peculiar one—the rivals meeting there under such circumstances, and greeting each other with the cordial warmth of old-time friends.

After a few words relative to their situation had passed between them, Dagger Don said:

"I presume, Mr. Davenport, you wish to go to Rainbow?"

"Yes, Donald," Davenport replied, "that was my destination when taken from the coach yesterday."

"Do you know the way?"

"Indeed, Donald, I am completely bewildered."

"Then I will accompany you a part of the way, at least."

"And why not all the way, Donald?"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be best for me," Don replied; "I was there yesterday in disguise looking for a notorious old horse-thief, and got into trouble with a bully, and before I got out of it, I killed the wretch. Besides Colonel Rodman, of Rodman's Ranch is there, and I have no worse enemy than he is."

"What! Colonel Rodman your enemy?" exclaimed Davenport in apparent surprise.

"He will have it that Dagger Don is Red Dagger."

"Then, my boy, I can settle that point with him pretty quickly, if you'll go with me. But, what reason has he to judge you so?"

"For no other reason," replied Don, honest and outspoken—determined to test his rival at once, "than, because his daughter has looked upon me with favor. He wishes her to marry a rich man against her will."

"Against her will?" repeated Davenport; "how do you know this, Donald?"

"From Millie's own lips."

"Donald," said Davenport seriously, "there must be a mistake, somewhere. I am the rich man you spoke of, and I was to have been married to Miss Rodman on my arrival at Rainbow Camp."

"Mr. Davenport, you'll find it is all the colonel's work. He is determined Millie shall marry the man of his choice. This you'll find to be the case if you consult Millie instead of her father."

"If I find such is the case, Donald," declared Davenport, "then I must admit I have been deceived most gloriously. If Millie does not marry me from choice and affection—her own free will, she will never be my wife. I am not the man to destroy the happiness of so lovable a girl. I know her father has been very favorable to our marriage, but if I find he has been prompted by selfish motives, I shall denounce him as a heartless scoundrel. And when I take into consideration the fact that he has been pressing me lately for financial help, which I came prepared to give him—though Red Dagger has it now—along with what you say Millie told you, it looks a little as if I had been made a dupe. Mind you, Donald, I don't mean to say Millie has been a party to this work of duplicity—far from it. She is incapable of such a thing—of doing a wrong act, and when I see her again I shall know the whole truth. And if I find that it is against her will that she has been betrothed to me, she will be free in a moment, so far as I'm concerned. I love her too dearly to force her to be my wife—to buy her, and if she loves another—you, Donald Barr—all I have to say is that you are worthy of her love and affections, and I will do all in my power to help you and her to a consummation of your love!"

"Good! good!" exclaimed the young scout, his manly face flushed with joy; "I am glad to hear you say this. I am not mistaken in your manhood and honor, nor is Millie. She said when you heard the facts you'd be too honorable to conspire with her father against her happiness. Mr. Davenport, there will be no feeling between us 'bout this love matter. Millie is the party to settle it between you and me. So now, I believe I'll run the risk of going into Rainbow with you, for you can bear witness that I am not Red Dagger. But, by the way, I left my horse and carbine over southwest in the hills, and I will have to go down and get them for I may not get around here again very soon."

"Lead the way, Donald, and I will follow you," said Davenport, impatient to be off.

Dagger Don led the way in the direction of his horse and gun, and in the course of an hour or two arrived in the little park, but to his surprise found his horse was gone. His gun and belt were still there, and upon investigation he found his horse had broken loose and wandered off toward the canyon.

This discovery made the scout a little uneasy and he hastened to get away from the place through fear his horse, falling into the hands of

the outlaws, might be tracked back to the park. And so he tacked about and headed for the northwest.

In a straight course Rainbow could have been reached in ten or fifteen miles travel, but owing to the rugged condition of the country Don concluded to follow a longer but more easily traveled route which would take them into camp from the north.

Rapidly the young men passed over the miles. Not an outlaw was seen or heard, but they finally came upon the smoldering embers of a camp-fire which the young scout, after an investigation, declared had been that of a party of Indians.

"Do you think they are hostiles, Donald?" asked Davenport.

For an answer the whizz of a bullet and the simultaneous crack of a rifle greeted their ears, the bullet cutting so close to Don's head that he felt the wind.

"Should say they were!" was the laconic reply of the young scout, as he made a bound for a clump of bushes, closely followed by his companion and two or three more shots from the unseen foe.

Not until they had gained the center of the friendly brush patch did they stop, and then with a grim smile on his face, Don said to his companion:

"Pard, it looks as though we were bushed."

"Our situation's not an enviable one, I assure you," responded Davenport; "but are we besieged by Indians or outlaws, Donald?"

"Ingins, I should say, judging by their poor marksmanship, though I was in too big a hurry to look about me. I don't know, either, exactly where the poison varlets are."

The scout and his friend were upon a high, broad plateau between two great canyons, upon which grew but a few scattering trees. Aside from these trees and the little brush patch in which they had taken refuge, the great level was entirely devoid of vegetation. This much Don had noticed, and he came to the conclusion that the Indians, if the foe that had fired upon them were red-skins, had been lying concealed behind boulders that here and there thrust their black heads above the surface.

In order to ascertain the location of the enemy Don had recourse to an old expedient. He hung his hat on the muzzle of his carbine and slowly raised it above the top of the bushes. And the ruse was successful, for it immediately drew a number of shots, one of which passed through the crown of the hat, and the shots were followed by a wild yell as the headgear sunk down, that no longer left them in doubt as to the foe being Indians, and no less than six or eight of them at that.

But in order to make sure of their exact number and precise location, the young scout cautiously started to crawl through the bushes to the edge of the thicket, but before he was within ten feet of it a couple of bullets came tearing through the brush so close to him that he was induced to retreat back to his friend. The bushes were so thick that he could not pass through without coming in contact with them and agitating the tops, by which the foe were enabled to note his movements.

"I'll try something else," the irrepressible youth observed, and taking out his knife he began clearing off a space of ground around them. By bending the bushes they were easily cut off, and in a few moments he had cleared off a six-foot square, piling the cut brush carefully around the outer edge, the limbs pointing outward.

"Pard," he now said, turning to the young banker, "can you handle a revolver?"

Davenport smiled, as he replied:

"Why, Donald, I was a cowboy for years on the Texan prairies, and am now considered one of the best pistol-shots in Trinidad."

"Then take one of my barkers, and if the Ingins should make a charge on us, warp it to 'em. I'm going to try a little experiment in fancy shooting. Down at Reel's Ranch we used to practice jumping up and firing at a target over a high screen, while off the ground. It takes quick work, but I got so's I could hit a mark large as a man three times out of five. But first, I'm going to get a squint at them varlets, and see what I can see."

The tallest of the brush was not over six feet high, and settling down to two-thirds his height, Don leaped straight into the air nearly three feet, and shot his eyes over the thicket.

"By smoky!" he exclaimed, when his feet touched the ground, "there's six or eight of the varlets out there, with guns in their hands, watching this thicket; and now I'm going to try a shot at them."

Taking up his carbine he cocked it, placed his finger on the trigger, took a position at one side of the little opening, and settled down for the spring. For a moment he stood thus, steadying himself, then up he sprang and off went his carbine.

A mocking yell from the savages told that his shot had been unsuccessful. But again cocking the weapon, he settled down for another trial, saying:

"Pard, this is what's called snap-shooting by sportsmen."

And as he thus spoke he leaped into the air, and again his carbine cracked, and this time a different report came down from the red-skins. It was a death-yell that peeled out, followed by a frantic cry of vengeance.

"You did it, Donald, that time!" exclaimed Davenport, amazed and delighted by the wonderful feat of the skillful young scout.

Don made no reply, but laying down his gun, sprang into the air again, and as his feet touched ground he took up his weapon, saying:

"Pard, they're coming! They mean to avenge the death of their friend! Come, let's git out of this!"

Davenport was surprised by the scout's action. He regarded their position there more favorable for defense than outside. But he could offer no remonstrance, for the youth was already on the move, and he could do nothing but follow him, come weal or woe.

As the savages came crashing into the thicket with a yell calculated to strike terror to the hearts of their enemies, the fugitives went out at the opposite side, and ran for dear life down the plateau.

Before the red-skins had discovered the escape of the whites, the latter were two hundred yards away; but discharging their rifles, they uttered a war-whoop and started in pursuit like famishing wolves after a deer.

Looking back Davenport saw that the fleet-footed wretches were gaining rapidly upon them.

"Donald," he said, "I'm afraid we made a mistake in not fighting them in the bush. They're gaining on us right along!"

"I want them to," was the young scout's short answer.

Wondering what new scheme was in the mind of the fertile-brained youth, Davenport said nothing more but awaited developments.

The pursuers continued to gain upon them. Ever and anon Don glanced back over his shoulder to note their proximity, and at last he stopped, turned around and dropped upon one knee, quickly bringing his gun to his shoulder.

The Indians were not over a hundred yards away and running close together, but the moment they saw the young scout raise his carbine they separated. But this made no difference to Don. He singled out his man and fired, and a savage fell with a broken thigh.

A fiendish yell burst from the Indians' lips and then they redoubled their efforts to reach the whites.

Still kneeling, Dagger Don continued to shoot as fast as he could work the lever of his death-dealing Winchester, and not until all but three of the savages were down did those three cease their advance and throw themselves upon the earth behind projecting boulders.

Then Don arose and continued his retreat, Davenport at his side, for the young banker had stopped when the boy did, determined to stay by him till the last.

The Indians sent two or three shots after them, but their guns, evidently of inferior kind, failed to carry up. They made no attempt to follow the whites and the last seen of them they were busy with their killed or wounded friends.

"Donald," said Horace Davenport, "when he realized that they were safe for the time being, 'I am utterly amazed at your fearless courage and your phenomenal skill as a rifleman, and snap-shot. By Jupiter! that was fine work!'"

"Practice makes perfect, they say," replied the boy, "and I'm having that every day pretty dashed thick. But it's a good thing there wasn't but a few red-skins in that gang, or we might have got worsted, and may yet, for all I know. I don't believe them varlets are over here alone, and if the folks at Rainbow don't look sharp, and let boy vagabonds alone, they'll wake up some morning and find their scalps gone."

After journeying a mile or two further along the plateau, Don and Davenport entered a rough, hilly, wooded country. Here they made

less speed, but they pushed on, keeping a sharp watch around them for lurking dangers.

Finally they descended a long, steep hill and found themselves in Red Canyon, in which, about three miles below, was Rainbow Camp located.

By this time the day was well advanced. In fact, the sun hung just above the western mountain range, and turning their faces down the canyon the two hurried on with light footsteps, realizing that their day's tramp would soon be at an end.

They had gone, however, less than half a mile when Don discovered a number of persons coming up the canyon, and it required no second look to tell them that it was a party of Indians.

"Red-skins, by the score!" exclaimed the young scout, "and we had better take to the bushes again until they pass!"

And so they hurried across the canyon, and finding a favorable place concealed themselves.

The red-skins came on. From their hiding-place the two young men watched, and when the Indians were up nearly opposite them, they made a discovery that sent the blood in icy currents from their hearts!

CHAPTER XII.

THE TRIP TO RAINBOW FALLS.

We left Millie Rodman and Frank Brenton starting on their jaunt to Rainbow Falls, which was about two miles up the canyon from camp. It was but a short walk for the maidens, and in an hour's time they had made the trip there.

Rainbow Falls, from which the camp below had taken its name, was a little sheet of water that came cascading down the mountain's side and fell with a sullen roar into a basin from a height of thirty feet.

Having bathed their heated brows in the cool, limpid water, the girls seated themselves and chatted away as two happy girls will, hearing no sound but the roar of the falls and their own voices, and watching for the appearance of the rainbow that was said at times to arch the misty brow of the falls. The moments slipped away unnoticed by them until an hour or more had passed.

The maidens had no thought of danger, for with the exception of the attack of the road-agents on the stage down the canyon the day before, outlaws and Indians had been unknown about Rainbow Camp. But in the midst of their fancied security the maidens were suddenly startled by sight of a figure stepping from around behind and confronting them. It was that of a half-naked, feather-bedecked Indian!

And such an Indian as he was! Tall and ungainly, with a face scarred and seamed beyond all semblance of a human visage, he was a most atrocious, repulsive and unclean thing!

The girls started up with a cry of fear and instinctively shrunk away from the savage and close to each other, trembling in every limb.

"Ugh!" grunted the savage with a beast-like attempt at a smile, "white squaws heap scared—much heap pretty squaws!"

Miss Frank, naturally a brave and plucky girl, swallowed the lump in her throat, and replied:

"I'm sorry I can't say the same of you! What are you doing here?"

Before the hideous wretch could reply no less than a score more Indians made their appearance and surrounded the girls, gazing upon them with leering eyes, their painted faces wearing a cunning, sinister smile.

The girls were now most thoroughly frightened, for they felt satisfied that the savages were not friendly Indians. Frank, however, managed to keep her fears under good control, and conceal her apprehensions. She knew something of the Indian character—his treachery, his vanity and vices—and at once changing her attitude toward the repulsive wretch who had first confronted her, she said, in a more friendly tone:

"You will go with us to camp, will you not, Mr. Indian?"

"Huh-ugh!" grunted the Indian, with a shake of the head.

"Why not?" asked Frank; "our people will give you tobacco and powder and much good fire-water. They have much joy for the red-men there in boxes and barrels."

"Yes—gun-barrels—coffin-boxes," returned the wily savage; "me no go to camp—me no like pale-face man—pale-face man no like me. Me Fireface Jim—me great chief—me bad, bold

Ingin—white squaws must go with Jim—be Jim's wife—make Jim's old wife hump out."

Millie's brain seemed set in a whirl, and her heart turned sick by the horrible wretch's words. But Frank, almost ready to sink down with fear, maintained an outward composure, and once more replied:

"Surely the great Fireface Jim would not make war on squaws. He will not harm us nor permit us to be harmed if he is a brave Indian. Come, Millie, the great Fireface is our friend," and as she thus spoke, Frank took her young friend by the arm and started off.

But Fireface stepped in before them, spoke to his warriors, and the next instant the maidens were seized, their hands tied, and then given to understand that they were captives, and would be taken away to the Indian village.

The poor girls were almost prostrated with fear and despair. Death at that moment would have been preferable to the unknown fate in store for them. They knew that the presence of hostile Indians in the vicinity was never dreamed of by the miners of Rainbow, and before they would be missed at home they would, in all probability, be beyond friendly aid.

After tarrying a few minutes at the falls, the Indians marched the captives away up the canyon, and at the very moment when the gloom of hopeless despair lay heaviest on the minds and hearts of the girls, friendly and loving eyes were upon them.

From their concealment at the base of the bluff, Donald Barr and Harry Davenport looked upon them in their captivity, their hearts throbbing in an agony of suspense, and their heroic young spirits aflame with the fire of vengeance. It was hard work for Donald Barr to control his emotions upon this occasion, and keep quiet, as his better judgment dictated.

Harry Davenport looked to the young scout for orders. He was ready to follow wherever he went, for he had come to regard the youth as possessed of a charmed life or preternatural power. Every hour he was in his company his admiration for the boy grew stronger.

They had counted the savages and found them ten to one, and yet Don would have attacked them despite the odds, had it not been clear enough to him that a failure to rescue the girls would make their escape impossible.

"Donald," finally whispered the young banker, "you are a fine strategist; can you not conceive some plan by which we can outwit them savages and save the girls?"

"With the aid of coming darkness," replied Don, "something may be done, but I— By heavens! look there, will you, coming out of that defile!"

This last exclamation was called out by sight of a number of horsemen that came galloping out of a narrow defile on the opposite side of the canyon and drew rein confronting the Indians.

Quickly the red-skins stopped and aligned themselves in a position of defense, for if they and the outlaws were friends, they did not, at first, recognize the horsemen, who were, in fact, Horace Davenport's late captors, the band of Red Dagger, the Mountain Brigand!

CHAPTER XIII.

"WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT," ETC.

THE presence of the outlaws gave Dagger Don and the young banker little hopes now for the rescue of the maidens. That the red-skins and brigands were there as friends, and in collusion, there was not a doubt in their minds.

Millie and Frank, however, not knowing the horsemen were outlaws, greeted their presence with a reviving hope—believing the men were rangers or cowboys to whom they could look for assistance.

As the outlaws drew rein confronting the Indians, one of them exclaimed:

"Great Romans! what kind of a procession are we buckin' up against here!—why, Fireface Jim, it is you! You ugly rascal, what are you doin' away over here?—been robbin' somebody's ranch?" and he glanced at the captives with an envious, admiring look upon his face.

"Me come git pale-face wives—young, pretty—kick ole wives out," responded Fireface Jim with a grin upon his hideous face that gave him a diabolical look.

All the while the outlaw spokesman sat feasting his eyes upon the sad, yet pretty faces, of the captives, and construing his looks as looks of friendly sympathy for them, Frank Brenton broke away from her custodian and running to

the horseman's side, and lifting her pale face to his with a pleading, imploring look in her eyes, she exclaimed:

"Oh, stranger! save us from these horrible Indians, I pray you!"

The outlaw was visibly touched by this appeal, but any one, knowing the man, could have seen that it was not through any of the finer feelings of human sympathy, for he possessed none, but that feeling which prompts the lion to wrest from the wolf its tender prey. The pretty, pleading eyes of the girl, her sweet, innocent face, and graceful form, were irresistible charms to the dark-visaged man, and dismounting he took her little, trembling hand in his, drew her closer to him, and with a vulturous look, said:

"Your appeal shall be heeded, pretty one. Fireface Jim must not carry you away to his lodge. He has many wives, while I, Lieutenant Bonn, haven't a single one."

There was something like the touch of a snake in the man's cold hand, and a hidden meaning in his words that caused Frank to withdraw her hand from his. A new fear instinctively took possession of her; but the malignant, atrocious look on the repulsive face of Fireface Jim, as he now confronted the outlaw, his whole form swelling out like an adder's neck, overshadowed this new-born fear, and she saw Lieutenant Bonn, as he had called himself, only as one who would befriend her.

"It is the eagle that takes the fish from the hawk," said Fireface, a fierce gleam in his snakish black eyes; "is the pale-face an eagle? Will he take the fish from the hawk?"

"Fireface," said Bonn, "you and I have always been friends. Many ponies have we left in your village, and now I ask that you give me this white girl."

"Fireface wants her himself," replied the Indian. "He will keep her—he will keep them both."

"But she wishes to go with me, and I sha'll take her."

"The pale-face speaks like a fool!" retorted the indignant chief. "Fireface's warriors are two where yours is one. Lethim beware! Fireface is no coward!"

"Then you will not give her to me?"

"No!" emphatically.

"But I shall take her."

"Not while Fireface lives!" and his hand dropped to his belt.

Lieutenant Bonn turned and glanced back at his men. The look was understood, and one by one the outlaws rode into position to the right and left of the savages.

A conflict seemed imminent between the old-time friends, though the captives were ignorant of the fact. The outlaw had set his heart upon Frank Brenton, and after a few more wrangling words between him and the chief, he turned to Miss Frank and said:

"My little woman, come, let me help you to a seat on my horse."

Quickly Fireface stepped in between the girl and the horse, half-drawing his tomahawk.

"Ingin, stand aside!" commanded Bonn.

"Is the pale-face a coward and a thief?"

For answer the chief received a bullet through the brain from the outlaw's revolver, and his body had scarcely touched the ground ere a wild, vindictive yell burst from the lips of his followers. Then tomahawks flashed in the air, revolvers began to crack, and the battle was on—as fierce and deadly struggle as ever raged between the hosts of Satan.

The outlaw, Lieutenant Bonn, had underestimated the courage of the red-skins. He acted upon the belief that if their chief was killed they would take to their heels rather than stand an open fight. But never was a man more mistaken. The savages were nerved by their superior numbers to avenge the death of their chief, and to a warrior they rushed upon the whites.

Donald Barr and Horace Davenport saw the beginning of the fight with a mingled feeling of hope and fear. That it was a fight to the death there was little doubt, judging by the frantic manner the combatants hurled themselves upon each other. Their fear was that the maidens would be trampled to death beneath the rushing feet of red-skin and plunging hoofs of horse, for they had lost sight of them among the struggling foes.

"By the ruins o' Babylon!" exclaimed Dagger Don, "I can keep quiet here no longer! I'm going to take a hand in that fight—help the girls away, at any rate!"

"And I shall follow, Donald!" declared the brave young banker, a stern, resolute look upon his face.

Donald Barr led the way from their concealment into the open valley, and started toward the scene of battle. But just then they saw Millie and Frank emerge from among the struggling forms, and like frightened deer start off across the valley.

This was better than Don and Davenport had hoped for, and they started on a run to intercept them.

A mounted outlaw happened, despite his engagement, to discover the presence of Don and the young banker hurrying to the help of the girls, and he whirled his horse and charged down toward them, firing upon them with his revolver. His bullets flew close and fast around them, and Davenport suddenly felt a sharp, stinging pain strike him in the leg, but in his excitement he knew not that he had been shot.

Millie and Frank saw the young scout and Davenport running to meet them, and at sight of them Millie recognized Dagger Don and exclaimed:

"Oh, Frankie! they are friends!"

Just then the young scout stopped, threw up his carbine and shot the mounted outlaw riding so boldly down upon them.

The next moment Millie was in the arms of Donald Barr barely conscious of her existence, while Davenport advanced to Frank Brenton and taking her by the arm conducted her toward the bluffs, at the same time speaking words of encouragement. Don and Millie followed, and the four were scarcely under cover of the thicket that fringed the base of the bluff, when Davenport grew sick and fell half-fainting to the earth.

And not until then did the young banker fully realize the cause of the sudden pain in his leg. He had been shot. His left leg was drenched in blood, and he had fallen through sheer weakness.

Millie and Frank's fettered hands were released by Don, and half delirious from effects of the terrible strain to which they had been subjected, they too, sunk down on the earth, trembling, pale and exhausted.

Dagger Don now had his hands full, for he saw at a glance that his friend Davenport was in a critical condition, and growing weaker from loss of blood, every minute. And so while the death-struggle was still raging less than thirty rods away, he took his knife and cut open the young banker's pants leg until the wound had been reached. To his surprise he found a lesser artery had been severed and that death would surely result unless the flow of blood could be stopped, and this he proceeded to do.

In his varied experience on the plains, Donald Barr had learned a few things in surgery, and that which he had learned best, and which was understood by most hunters and plainsmen, was how to stop bleeding from vein or artery.

Finding a round, smooth-faced stone he laid it upon the artery for a compress. Davenport contributed a silk handkerchief which the scout bound over the stone and around the leg. Then putting a stick through the bandage he twisted it as tight as possible and the result was the immediate stoppage of the bleeding.

And scarcely had he finished his surgical work when a triumphant savage yell announced the termination of the battle in favor of the Indians.

Taking up his carbine, Don ran to the edge of the thicket and looked out into the canyon. He saw that but three of the outlaws remained in their saddles and these were fleeing up the pass—one of them reeling in his saddle in a way that told he was seriously hurt.

But most dearly had the red-skins paid for their victory. But five of the one-and-twenty that had gone into the fight were on foot, while on a space not over two rods square lay a score and a half of forms, most of them lifeless—some of them still fighting imaginary foes in the deliriousness of death—striking the air, moaning and shrieking—writhing upon the earth and over each other like huge wounded worms. And to add to the horror of the bloody field, the living red-skins began tomahawking and scalping the wounded outlaws. When this fiendish work had been accomplished, they held a momentary consultation, evidently to decide upon a future course of action, and when they were observed to glance around them and down the canyon, the young scout mistrusted what was in their minds, and, presently, when they began searching the ground around the battle-field, he found he was right—they were searching for the captives, determined not to give up what had already cost so dearly.

Dagger Don did not know whether he and Davenport had been seen or not when they ran out to meet the girls; but when the red-skins

finally headed across the canyon, directly toward the point where he was concealed, the young scout made up his mind that he had a fight of his own on hand, and he quickly made ready for action.

CHAPTER XIV.

SURPRISED RED-SKINS.

WITH cocked carbine the intrepid Dagger Don awaited the approach of the five red-skins who were evidently ignorant of the fact of the maidens having friends near.

The scout was screened from observation. Moreover the sun had gone down and the shadows of evening were fast gathering in the canyon and creeping up the mountain-sides.

The Indians being armed with tomahawks alone, must fight at close quarters, and this Dagger Don did not wish, and resolved to prevent it.

On across the valley they came, with eyes and ears on the alert. They were less than thirty steps from the bluff, when suddenly a tongue of flame shot from the bushes before them, and one of their number uttered a shriek, and staggering backward, fell dead. They were taken wholly by surprise, and like deer the four remaining warriors turned and fled as from a legion of advancing foes.

Dagger Don did not waste a second shot on the red-skins, for he felt certain they would give him no more trouble that night, if ever, unless backed by a goodly number of friends.

The report of the scout's gun, and the savage's death-yell had thrown Davenport in a fever of excitement, and the young banker was in the act of crawling off to the boy's assistance, when the youth appeared before them, his face flushed with triumph. The report he had to make was most gratifying, indeed, for by this time Millie and Frank had somewhat recovered from their fright and nervous prostration.

Millie Rodman, in her confusion and terror consequent upon the ordeal through which she had passed, did not recognize Horace Davenport at first, nor in fact until he had addressed her after his wound had been bandaged. She was surprised and confused, and begged him to forgive her for not recognizing him before. She expressed great surprise at his being there, congratulated him on his escape from the Red Daggers, and kindly offered her services in any way that would tend to alleviate his suffering.

Although rid of the presence of foes for the time being, the situation was not a very pleasant or safe one. Horace Davenport was unable to walk the two and a half miles to Rainbow Camp.

"Donald," said the young banker, "leave me here alone and take the girls into camp, and then you can bring help to get me in."

To this proposition the girls would not listen for a moment. The young banker had received his wound in helping them out of danger, and they resolved to remain with him until aid could be secured to carry him to camp.

But Dagger Don was not satisfied to leave the three there while he went on to camp for assistance. He was afraid the four Indians might return, reinforced, to look for the party that had fired that last deadly shot, and in that case they would be sure to find his friends. Therefore, another hiding place must be found, and Don set out to look for it.

He returned in a few minutes, and taking Davenport on his back, Millie and Frank carrying his carbine and revolvers, carried him to the place selected. It was a little pocket in the hillside not far from Rainbow Falls, and well concealed behind a dense growth of bushes.

Again Davenport urged the maidens to accompany Dagger Don, but they still declined to leave him, and so Don bid the three good-by and was, with the "god-speed" of his friends, off for Rainbow Camp.

With the safety of his friends uppermost in his mind, the young scout did not stop to think how he would be received in the camp from which he was forced to flee the day before for his life. Unselfish and self-sacrificing in his devotion to his friends, he let no fear of personal danger or hardship deter him for a moment, in what he considered a duty.

When the lights in the miners' cabins burst on his view he conceived the idea that he would find the camp in great excitement over the absence of the girls, and would not have been surprised had he met a searching party on his way down; but as he entered the place he found it was unusually quiet.

As Colonel Rodman's cabin stood first at the upper end of the camp, Dagger Don decided to

go there first, resolved that the old ranchman should tolerate his presence long enough to hear his story of Millie, Frank and Horace Davenport's perilous situation, at least. So he turned to the left and cut across the little pine-clad knoll on the lower end of which stood the colonel's house.

On his way through the pines he came suddenly upon a horse hitched to a bush. He could see, despite the darkness, that it was bridled and saddled, and evidently awaiting a rider. He thought a little strange of this, and was thereby induced to approach with a little caution the colonel's cabin, through the window of which he could see a light shining.

CHAPTER XV.

DAGGER DON AND RED DAGGER MEET.

APPROACHING Colonel Rodman's cabin from the rear, Dagger Don heard the sound of voices within. The window was open to admit the cool, mountain breeze, and as he passed it he glanced in and saw Colonel Rodman and a strange man seated by a table in conversation. The sight of the stranger's face, as he passed, caused him to stop, step back and take a second look, when, to his utmost surprise, he recognized the man as Red Dagger, the outlaw chief, whom he had seen ride away from his mountain camp that morning.

This startling discovery caused the young detective-scout to hesitate and, after a moment's speculation, he concluded to steal up under the window and do a bit of eavesdropping, whether he heard any good of himself or not.

He found Red Dagger was doing most of the talking, and in a very bold and unguarded tone, at that. And what Don heard fairly astonished him. But the reader has already heard the story of crime and wickedness, as detailed by the brazen-faced desperado, in a previous chapter, and therefore we will not repeat it.

To Donald Barr it was a shocking revelation, reflecting so strongly upon the character and reputation of Colonel Rodman, that he could scarcely believe the half of it. And he was charitable enough not to have believed a single word of it, if the colonel had once denied its truthfulness. But this he did not do, and the heated language with which he replied to the outlaw was a tacit admission of guilt.

Determined, however, to hear the whole story he lingered by the window until the colonel had indorsed the draft, the outlaw had declared himself Red Dagger, and arose to depart, defying the colonel, the miners, the troops and Dagger Don, himself, then he arose and glided around to the door of the cabin, determined to thwart the villain or die in the attempt.

Of all desperadoes in the West, Red Dagger was the one most wanted by horse-ranchmen, stage and Express companies, and all law-abiding people in general. This Dagger Don knew, and shoving the cabin door open, he sprang into the room and with his revolver pointed on the surprised desperado's breast, exclaimed:

"Dagger Don will now speak! Hands up, villain!"

But, Red Dagger, though taken by surprise, was not to be taken prisoner by a boy, so he thought, and, quick as a flash, he whipped out his revolver and attempted to use it. But the young scout had the advantage in that his weapon was already up and he had only to press the trigger, and Red Dagger's good right arm fell shattered at his side, his revolver dropping from nerveless fingers to the floor.

A groan and curse escaped the outlaw's lips, and, whirled half around by the shock of Don's bullet, he was brought face to face with Allen Rodman upon whose countenance there was a smile of malignant joy.

"Ah-ha!" burst from the old man's lips, "you've met your match, villain! The devils and the 'Daggers' have met!"

Quickly Red Dagger drew a second revolver with his left hand, and Donald Barr would have clipped his other wing, but for the unfortunate fact that Colonel Rodman blew out the light wrapping the room in darkness before he could do so. And then he dare not fire for at last sight of him Rodman was in range with the outlaw.

Knowing he would be a conspicuous mark in the doorway, Don quickly stepped aside. As he did so there was a flash in the room, a pistol rung out, a groan escaped Rodman's lips and he fell like an ox to the floor, shot down by the outlaw. But locating the villain by the flash of his pistol Dagger Don leaped forward and dealt

him a furious blow on the head with his revolver that staggered him. A second and third blow followed in quick succession and then the notorious villain lay stretched upon the floor unconscious if not dead.

Meanwhile Colonel Rodman, who lay on the other side of the room moaning in agony, was in doubt as to which of the "Daggers," as he had called them, was alive until he heard the voice of Donald Barr inquiring:

"Colonel Rodman, are you badly hurt?"

"Yes, I'm murdered!" was the answer; "why the devil don't you call help? Help! help!"

"Easy, colonel, and I'll alarm the camp," and going to the door he fired his revolver in the air four times in succession, and then shouted at the top of his lungs for help.

He was answered by a dozen different voices, for his first shot had been heard at the nearest cabins and men were already on their way there when he made his call.

In a few moments a score of miners had arrived panting at the door, inquiring the cause of the alarm.

"Come in, some one who has a match, and light the lamp!" commanded a voice from within which was at once followed by a groan of distress.

A miner rushed in, struck a match and as its light reached out over the room a startling sight was revealed.

On one side lay Allen Rodman weltering in blood, and on another lay the dashing Winfield Kirby, while over him, revolver in hand, stood a young stranger whom none of the miners recognized as Vagabond Josh at that moment.

"Light the lamp! light the lamp!" cried the youth pointing to the lamp on the table; but the match burned out and the room was once more in gloom. Soon, however, another was lighted and applied to the lamp.

Then the miners crowded in, until the room was full, demanding an explanation.

"He can tell you! he can tell you!" cried Colonel Rodman, raising his hand and pointing toward Donald Barr.

"This man here," said Donald, pointing down to the form of the outlaw, "is Red Dagger, the outlaw—"

"What! Winfield Kirby, Red Dagger?" exclaimed a miner.

"Yes, Red Dagger," repeated the boy. "I found him here and shot an arm off him, and am sorry now I didn't kill him; and then he shot Colonel Rodman."

"And who are you?" demanded a miner.

"Donald Barr, the detective-scout—otherwise Dagger Don," was the answer that greeted the ears of the startled crowd.

"Dimpled thunder!" burst from the lips of Tobe Kahn.

"He's Vagabond Josh!" cried Curly Bill, "he's the Red Dagger that's murdered the colonel and Winfield Kirby! Where's the new Vigilance Committee? Call 'em in! call 'em in!"

"Hold on there, men!" cried Colonel Rodman, raising himself on his elbow; "the boy has told you the truth! Winfield Kirby is Red Dagger, and I have been a fool!"

For a few moments the miners stood as if dumb, gazing at the intrepid boy and at each other.

Finally Colonel Rodman was placed on a couch, his clothes removed and his wound examined. Dr. Banks, the camp's physician, pronounced it a fatal wound, but he carefully dressed it and administered a sedative.

In the mean time Red Dagger had recovered consciousness, and was raised and seated in a chair, and instead of the handsome Winfield Kirby the miners now looked upon a distressed, dejected wretch with a broken arm dangling at his side and his face covered with blood from a scalp-wound inflicted by Donald Barr's revolver.

About this time some one happened to think about the colonel's daughter, and, turning to the wounded man, asked:

"Colonel, where's your daughter?"

"At Mr. Brenton's; she and our servant went there to spend the night," answered Rodman.

"My God! colonel, she's not there! neither is my daughter," cried Brenton; "I supposed all the time they were here!"

"No, Brenton," answered Rodman, "Millie went to your place during the afternoon. I heard her say that she and your daughter were going to visit Rainbow Falls."

"Then they never returned!" cried Brenton.

"Gentlemen," said Donald Barr, "I can tell you where your daughters are."

"Where? where?" exclaimed Brenton, almost distracted.

"I left them with Horace Davenport con-

cealed under a bluff up beyond Rainbow Falls," the young scout answered.

At mention of Davenport's name Red Dagger lifted his haggard face and gazed up at the boy with a wild look of surprise.

"I would have brought them to camp with me, but Davenport is seriously wounded, and unable to walk," Don continued.

"Davenport!" exclaimed Hank March; "colonel, isn't that the man the robbers took from the stage yesterday?"

The colonel answered in the affirmative.

Red Dagger laid his well arm on the table and rested his head upon it, his face downward, to conceal his emotions of despair and suffering.

"Yes," Donald again went on, "I rescued Davenport from the outlaws this morning, and started with him to this camp. On the way we were fired upon by Indians—"

"Indians? Good God! what next?" broke in Tobe Kahn.

"Yes, Indians," continued Don; "and after a bit of a skirmish with them, we reached this canyon about three miles above here, and discovered another party of red-skins coming toward us. We hid in the bushes until the Indians came up, when we discovered Miss Rodman and her young friend in their power, being marched away northward. But they didn't go far apart us when Red Daggers's band of outlaws came galloping down the canyon, and meeting the Indians, halted. They held a little talk, and finally got into a wrangle about the possession of the captives. One of the outlaws wanted the Indians to divide up, and the reds refused, and they got into a fight such as I never saw. During the struggle the girls got away and started to run. Davenport and I ran out to meet them, when an outlaw, seeing us, rode out of the fight and down toward us, firing as he came. Before I could shoot the villain, he put a ball through Davenport's leg. But we got the girls to a place of safety, and I fixed up Davenport's wound. The Ingins and outlaws fought on like demons, completely annihilating each other. But three outlaws, and one of them wounded, escaped, and but four Indians out of twenty-one got away after I belted one of the five that escaped the outlaws' bullets."

"Good! good!" shouted Lundy Barker.

"Hurrah for Vagabond Josh!" added Hank March, stepping up and shaking the young scout's hand; "what have you got to say now, men o' Rainbow, against the hero o' the knife duel?—of Dagger Don bein' an outlaw?"

"He had no business comin' here in disguise," growled a friend of the dead Taos Tim.

"And Taos Tim hadn't any business foolin' with the gun when he didn't know it was loaded," declared March.

"For God's sake, men," suddenly exclaimed Colonel Rodman, "I wish you would go at once—some of you, and bring my daughter home! I cannot live until morning, and I desire to see Millie and Davenport before I die!"

"Ah, Beverly Ward!" came in hoarse tones from the lips of Red Dagger, who, lifting his haggard, pain-contorted face from the table, stared with bloodshot eyes at Rodman; "the wages of sin are death! Your career's been a long one—twice as long as mine. I'd advise you to make a clean breast, old man, of all your crimes before you go into the presence of your Maker!"

"Look to your own soul, murderous fiend!" hissed the old colonel, gasping for breath between each word.

"Dagger Don," said the outlaw, addressing the young scout, "before you go away, I want to tell you a little story on the colonel, for I may not be here when you get back."

"Is it the story of crime you detailed to him a while ago?" asked Don.

"Ah! then you heard me remind the colonel of his early sins? Well, then, the rest of it will be short. It's true, I don't owe you anything, but then the colonel may forget it in his dying confession and I want to make all things straight. Now, the fact is, three of my men—Red Daggers—have been in the colonel's employ over three years, and—"

"It's a lie! an infernal lie!" exclaimed Rodman, fiercely.

"Keep cool, colonel," responded the villain; "remember you are up here in Rainbow for your health. I'll let Dagger Don decide as to whether my story is true or not. As I was saying, Don, three of my men worked on Rodman's Ranch, and one of them—Dave Bascom—was his foreman. Dave was as slick a road-agent as ever held up a coach, and he did considerable in that line while at Rodman's Ranch."

"As you know, the colonel disliked you because his daughter liked you. He wished her to

marry a rich man. He knew you were meeting his daughter out here and there, so he detailed Dave Bascom and two others of Dave's choosing, to capture or kill you. What he intended to do if he captured you was to have you hung as an outlaw."

"Now, one morning in last May, you were held up by a masked man on the edge of the plain below the ranch. That man was Dave Bascom, foreman of the ranch. He heard you tell the girl what you were and that you had a large sum of money on your person, and so Dave thought he'd secure the money and you, too. But you proved too 'flip' with the knife for him, and got away. His friends came along and found him dying, but had life enough left to tell them of you having the money, and so they told the colonel, and the colonel dispatched a number of his cowboys in pursuit of you; and they gave you a lively race through the hills, and you killed another of them and escaped. Now, all of this I got from one of the two Red Daggers still, at last accounts, in the colonel's employ. So you can see that Allen Rodman—Beverly Ward, is a schemer, and since you have been able to thwart both of us, I hope you'll get the girl."

Colonel Rodman made no denial of this story more than already recorded, for, overcome with pain and excitement, he had fainted, and for awhile the doctor was alarmed about his recovery.

A party of ten men was made up, and under guidance of Donald Barr set off up the canyon to conduct the maidens and Davenport to camp.

And presently a dozen masked men made their appearance at Rodman's cabin and demanded possession of the person of Red Dagger. They were the new Vigilance Committee, and the notorious outlaw was their first victim; although to Donald Barr was given the credit of the great villain's capture, and to him was given the reward that had been offered for the outlaw's capture dead or alive.

CHAPTER XVI.

ENDING IN SURPRISES.

DAGGER DON, on his return up the canyon with a party of miners, found Davenport and the maidens safe where he had left them.

The young banker was laid on a litter and tenderly borne to camp.

By request of both Mr. Brenton and his daughter, Frank, Horace Davenport was taken to their cabin where everything within human power was done to alleviate the young banker's suffering.

On the way home Dagger Don told Millie of her father being wounded by Red Dagger, but adroitly left the inference that he was not badly hurt. This prepared her for her meeting with her father, but she soon learned from his own lips that his time on earth was short.

As for Horace Davenport, the doctor thought he would get along all right with careful nursing, though, at best, it would be some weeks before he could get about.

Colonel Rodman expressed a great desire to see Mr. Davenport before he died, and so on the next day four strong miners took up the cot the young man was lying upon and carried up to Rodman's cabin.

The meeting of the two men was a very affecting one under the circumstances, neither of them being able to sit up.

They talked over the situation for some time, and finally the colonel drifted onto the subject that had so long been nearest his heart—the marriage of Millie to Davenport. He was anxious to see his daughter provided for before he died. To this the young banker responded:

"Colonel, within the past twenty-four hours I have learned a great deal that has entirely changed my mind in regard to marrying your daughter. In the first place, I find she loves another—Donald Barr—and he has proven himself worthy of her, or any other girl on earth. In the second place, I find I have been deceived in regard to Millie's affections for me, and I think your zeal and anxiety for our marriage has been the cause of all this trouble and suffering. But I freely forgive you, colonel, for the happy thought that comes to me is that the true facts in the case were discovered before it was too late—before Millie's happiness was forever forfeited. No, colonel, I will never marry Millie. I have been blind, but now I see."

The colonel was sorely disappointed by the young banker's change of mind, and when he found that all his hopes and aspirations had vanished, and he on the brink of the grave, the ranchman gave up. He admitted, frankly, that he had deceived Davenport—that many of the affectionate letters purporting to have come

from Millie to the young banker, were prepared by the hand of another woman. As Millie had always been a kind and obedient child, ever solicitous of his welfare, he felt certain that she would make no remonstrance to his wishes. He had hoped to profit financially by his daughter's marriage with him. He asked and received the young banker's forgiveness for what he had done.

After Horace had been removed to the miner's cabin again, the colonel sent for Donald Barr. The young scout came at once, and when seated by the dying man's couch, the latter said:

"Donald, I believe I heard you say that you'd heard all that Red Dagger narrated to me of the crime of Beverly Ward and Sam Dolby in Kentucky years ago?"

"Yes, sir," replied Don, "I heard him say Beverly Ward and his father had entered into a conspiracy against two young Northern men named Dayton and Armstrong—that Dayton was killed and Armstrong imprisoned for life for the murder."

"Every word of that was true," declared the penitent old man. "Armstrong was as innocent of that murder as yourself. It matters not who did it. I deny nothing that reckless villain Red Dagger said, for it was evident his step-father, Sam Dolby, had posted him well. But, Donald, what I wanted to ask you is this: are your parents living?"

"My mother is living in southern Kansas, a widow. My father, Henry Barr, was killed years ago by outlaws," Don answered.

"Wasn't your mother a widow when she married Barr?"

"No, sir; if she was I have never known it."

"Her name is Elizabeth?"

"Ah! then you knew my mother? Her name is Elizabeth," the young man answered, wondering what the man was coming to.

"Yes, I knew her, and she was a widow when she married Henry Barr," the old ranchman said; "and she was the widow of Robert Armstrong who died in prison for the murder of his friend, Dayton, and you are Robert Armstrong's son?"

"Mr. Rodman, this cannot be possible!" exclaimed Donald, "or I should have heard of it before!"

"But it is true, Donald," the old man reaffirmed; "your mother will tell you so, poor, proud-spirited woman! She has kept it from you that you might never know that your father died in State's Prison. You, Donald, were born three months after your father was sentenced. In less than a year after your birth your father died. When you were three years old your mother married Barr and then all came West. You were too young to remember any of these things. But that conspiracy of Ward and Dolby's haunted me day and night, and when I first saw you three years ago I thought that Robert Armstrong had returned from the grave to avenge his wrongs. By investigation, I found that you were the son of the woman who had once been the wife of Robert Armstrong, and then I knew you were Robert Armstrong's son. This discovery made me fear you. I conceived the thought that you, grown almost to manhood, had been put upon my track to avenge your father's wrongs. For this I feared you, and that fear preyed upon my mind until I could neither rest nor sleep. Your love for Millie, I imagined, was all that stayed your hand."

"Well, Mr. Rodman," said Don in deep surprise, "this is all new to me, however true it may be."

"Your mother will bear me out in that you are Robert Armstrong's son," the old ranchman continued. "I have brought this matter up so that the memory of Robert Armstrong might be cleared of the shadow hanging over it, and that you might know that you are not the son of a criminal, for I never dreamed but that you knew all about your father's imprisonment and death and, as I have said, sent out to hunt me and Sam Dolby to death. I knew your father had declared until the last he was innocent, and that it was a conspiracy of Beverly Ward and Sam Dolby to ruin him, and so I imagined this story had been told to his son in whose breast had been kindled and kept burning the spirit of revenge. But it seems now that all my fears have been the nightmare of a guilty conscience, for as you know, I am Beverly Ward, having changed my name after going to Texas from Kentucky. I can hardly hope for your forgiveness, Donald, and—"

At this juncture Millie came in, and her father became silent.

Dagger Don arose and, having addressed a few words to the maiden, took his departure from the cabin, his mind in a state of general confusion over the colonel's startling story.

And then Millie was the next to hear a most surprising story from the lips of her father. He admitted that she was not his own daughter, but the daughter of the murdered Dayton, just as Sam Dolby had told Red Dagger. He told her that he had adopted her when a babe, and, thanks to his noble, Christian wife, who knew nothing of his sins, she had been brought up a good, kind and noble-minded girl.

From Rodman's cabin Dagger Don went down to visit Horace Davenport. Entering the room where the wounded man lay, he took a bit of paper from his pocket saying:

"This Colonel Rodman informs me belongs to you, pard. I took it from the pocket of Red Dagger after I downed him last night."

A grim smile passed over the young banker's face when he looked at the paper. It was the draft for twenty-five thousand that Red Dagger had taken from him, and afterward forced Rodman to sign over.

"Donald," said Davenport, "this draft or its equivalent I mean to present to you."

"Lord!" exclaimed the boy, in astonishment, "what would I do with that amount of money?"

"You can take care of it, Donald; you've got the brains for business, and now, I want you to consider that from this day there is on deposit, to your credit, in my bank at Trinidad, twenty-five thousand dollars to be paid over to you on the day of your marriage to Millie Rodman."

The young scout, his face radiant with joy and surprise, responded:

"Well, Mr. Davenport, you are a most generous man."

"And you are a brave and gallant youth to whom I owe a debt of eternal gratitude."

Colonel Rodman died on the third day after his encounter with Red Dagger, and was buried on the gentle slope above his cabin, thus finding a grave instead of health in the atmosphere of the highlands.

The old man had made a will in which he named Millie as his sole heir. Horace Davenport was named as executor, and we had as well remark here that the young banker settled up the affairs of the estate, paid off all claims, and turned over to Millie what little there was left.

A week or so after her father's death, Millie, accompanied by Donald Barr, left Rainbow on the stage for the south. Millie went to Pueblo to a friend of her mother's, where she lived for three years, when Donald took her away to a pleasant home of their own, a smiling, happy bride.

But the most surprising thing of all was the way Horace Davenport's trip to Rainbow turned out. He had started there for a wife; he had been robbed and carried away a prisoner into the hills; he had been rescued by his rival in love, and afterward seriously wounded by an outlaw bullet; he had relinquished all claims upon the affections of the girl he had expected to marry. For nearly two months, by virtue of his injuries, he was compelled to remain in the cabin of the miner, Mr. Brenton. His almost constant attendant and companion was Miss Frank, and from the very first hour of his advent into that humble cabin, he was struck by the womanly kindness and gentleness of the girl, and as the days wore on, and the noble qualities of her heart and mind began to develop naturally, that cabin home became pervaded with an enchanting, charming atmosphere, in which the pretty face of Millie Rodman faded away like the vision of a pleasant dream, while that of Frances Brenton shone out with radiant reality.

But why add more? Suffice it to say that Horace Davenport came to Rainbow for a wife, and despite Red Dagger the outlaw, and the rivalry of the gallant Donald Barr, when he started home, Frances Brenton accompanied him, a happy bride—the wife of the young cowboy banker of Trinidad.

THE END.

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